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FICTION

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THE ORIGINAL SCIENCE FICTION

STORIES

Volume 10

MARCH, 1959

Number 1

NOVELET

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If war broke out, there would be no ships to the stars. But there was a hope for peace and star-exploration, too, if they were willing to subject one man to a revoltingly inhuman treatment.

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Novelet

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project starlight

by Kate Wilhelm

illustrated
by
ORBAN

This was America, where the fundamental dignity of the individual was regarded as guaranteed to all. However short of the ideal the practice might be, violations were still wrongs to be corrected, not the rights of the State which needed no justification. Yet...world peace required that one man undergo an inhuman course of training and brainwashing, as a desperate gamble...

THE CEREMONIES were scheduled for June—four months to prepare for them, to inform the various dignitaries, to complete the museum. Only...would there be a celebration after all? The matter had been considered settled until the curious message re-

layed from Mars. Then an investigation had started and now, in the hands of the United State Attorney General, was being culminated. He, had sent his secretary from the office, as well as his official staff members; now he confronted the rather square figure of the great woman doc-



tor, Sonya Tomaris. She was returning his gaze steadfastly, very serious in demeanor; but there was something he caught intuitively that made him feel uncomfortable, as though she were laughing at him.

"Dr. Tomaris, this request to appear here must have struck you as very odd." He played with the papers on his desk, not looking at them since he knew their contents so precisely that he was even aware of each blemish in the paper.

"Yes." She smiled then and waited—knowing, perhaps, that her passivity was unsettling in its effect on him.

"You have known Dr. Christianson a good many years haven't you?"

"Nearly twenty five, I believe."

He wanted to jolt her from her complete serenity; but to do so would at the same time give her a glimpse of his hand—which the President of the United States had specifically warned him not to do, if he could avoid it.

He said, "We have an accurate record of your connec-

tion with Dr. Christianson. For verification, however, I'd like to clear up a few points. First, did he have any intimate fore-knowledge of the switch-over from the stellar drive project to the missiles operation?"

"I'm afraid I don't understand." She was gracious and very anxious to help, her frown of concentration said.

"You did give the scientists periodic checks for signs of stress or strain, didn't you?" He waited for her nod and continued, "Did Dr. Christianson at any time prior to the cessation of Project Starlight give any hint that he was aware that it would be discontinued?"

HER VOICE was as matter-of-fact as his had been as she answered, "No." She added, "You don't realize how wrapped in their work the man was. It was his life, his only interest, perfecting that drive."

"I see. And the day following the new orders, he went to Wyoming, his home, taking six scientists with him. Dr.

Tomaris, did he seriously think he could accomplish his stated intention of finishing his work there, alone, comparatively speaking, and with no resources?" Scepticism and disbelief, mingling with amusement, crept into his carefully-trained voice as he smiled encouragingly at her.

"Yes, he did." Dr. Tomaris kept her own merriment well concealed as the angry flush spread over the Attorney General's face and down his neck. She watched him riffle through the papers before him, unwilling to continue until he had fully gained his composure. She remembered that day nearly ten years earlier.

"Here it is." Chris shook his head soberly over the flimsy sheet of yellow paper. "Ordered to abandon Project Starlight and take up where we left off with Operation 5000." He let the paper flutter from his fingers in a peculiarly lifeless motion and, with stooped shoulders, wandered aimlessly from the room.

There was a silence, and a flurry of activity—of clearing throats, and avoiding one an-

other's eye; then, gradually, the other men left the room without making any comment. Two of them headed for the bar that was a part of the tightly-guarded desert town. The woman stayed behind looking over the desert beyond the town's edge, seeing in a distorted Judas tree a man's form, upright arms outstretched to the stars.

"Knew it would come." Yellow hair and brown eyes, he might have played to perfection the scarecrow of Oz. He was a physicist, Claud Osterly.

"Yeah." The second was a mathematician; both were in their early thirties.

"Old Chris will quit. He won't go back to war games again." Yellow hair stirred the highball he had ordered. He hadn't noticed which button his finger had contacted; when he drank, he wouldn't recognize a flavor.

"Me too. There's been too much war already." His eyes were on the drink on the bar with ice slowly melting, but he saw his wife—eight months pregnant—and his two children, trying to hide from the

fury of hydrogen weapons and missiles, trying to escape the insidious wafting winds that brought disease. He started to curse in a monotone that was charged with hatred.

"Cut it, Rico. Here comes Sonny." Yellow hair waved toward the stool next to him. "Join the happy throngs, Sonny. You staying on?"

Sonya Tomaris nodded and then, with a puzzled look as if she had not considered it before, she shrugged and ordered a double scotch, running her finger along the buttons decisively until she located what she wanted. She downed it quickly and ordered another. "Here's to the stars, boys," she said bitterly, "Someday a ship will come swinging down from the stars and someone will say, 'Another dead world—I wonder what happened.'" She swallowed the second drink and left again, saying that she was on her way to see Chris.

THE OLD man was sitting before his desk, sorting papers with crisp movements. The indecision of before had

vanished: he was full of purpose as he moved from his desk to the wall safe and back, again and again with both hands full, and began making piles. Sonny, watched wordlessly for a few minutes leaning comfortably against the door. Chris ignored her completely.

"I have my orders, too, Chris," she said slowly.

"And?" He still didn't look up.

"They are to try to keep everyone together until further notice." She lit a cigaret and flipped the match toward the waste can. It missed.

Chris gave her a curious glance then. His eyes were very bright and penetrating—an electrifying personality, they called it in the numerous slick magazine articles about him. He was the brains of Project Starlight and Operation 5000 before it. He had sent the first space ship to the moon and followed it with another to Mars and Venus. Operation 5000 had started as a method of sending controlled vessels to the planets, with no pilots necessary; it had been too successful, and was con-

verted to military use for hydrogen warheads. Then bugs had appeared in it and, as the crises that had nurtured it waned, it had been abandoned for the research into stellar travel. Now it was being dug up again.

He said, "And again, Sonny?"

"You're right, of course. No one could do it. But they mean business. A military escort will be provided anyone trying to leave, and will see to it that he returns. We're all in it together from now on."

"So, they would draft brains as well as manpower." Chris chuckled without mirth. "Do they think that a man can be *made* to think up new ways to kill other men? Do they think that the brain is to be ordered to pull forth new ideas like a dispenser putting forth food?" He laughed dryly and there was nothing but bitterness in it.

SONYA SAID, "It's going to be serious this time, Chris. I think you know that. Everyone wants Mars exclusively. No holds barred. People can be made to work.

There are ways. It's happened before."

"Ah, yes. Concentration camps, torture, brain washing, hostages, menticide. I know—I read your excellent books on the subject. Look at me, Sonny. I'm an old man. I was a child when the Korean War ended, and ever since then I have lived under the threat of new war. Once, briefly, it came—and I know what hell means, because I saw it then. I have made plans for this day, knowing since they landed on Mars that it would come. If you must, you may report that I said so. But as for forcing me to work for them, it is an impossibility. I have no one other than myself. All my life, my dream has been to get to the stars, and there wasn't room for anyone else. People say, 'He is rich. He has made much money. Why does he still work?' But always it has been for the stars, and no war will make me stop now."

Sonny studied him thoughtfully for a long minute, then smiled her homely smile that was slightly lopsided and asked, "Got room for a psychologist in those plans?"

One by one they drifted back to see Chris; some stayed to discuss the plans and others left—regretfully sometimes—some with suspicions they couldn't quiet, a few with knowledge and wishes for good luck. They sorted themselves as they examined their own consciences for the most part. Only a few were denied the right to choose.

There were seven of them in the car when the guards stopped it. Three more were added, their uniforms a decided contrast to the casual tropical clothes of the others. They were going to town to celebrate, they said. They were very gay, very eager to show the world that their combined power couldn't be beaten. The guards were relieved; they had been told to expect dissension and discontent, possibly an attempt to escape. Their bound and gagged bodies were found the following day. They had fought and they showed it, but seven—even when one was a woman—had been too formidable for them. A call went out for the

seven, but no trace of them was found.

II

THE ATTORNEY GENERAL studied the paper containing the report of their arrests. He asked, "While the seven of you were on the Wyoming ranch, exactly what did you do?"

"I, personally, or the group of us?"

He wondered if she were being deliberately facetious and decided that his question could have, in fact, been ambiguous. "Both ways, Doctor. First you, and then the rest."

"I did nothing. As you know I am a psychologist. I know nothing about stellar drives, and next to nothing about theoretical mathematics. And so far as I could determine, that is what occupied their time. Dr. Christianson is an absolute genius about the problems of interstellar flight, as you well know, and he lived the subject until his breakdown. As for the rest—at first they were fired with his enthusiasm. But as it became more and more evident

that it was merely the fantasy of an old sick man, they lost interest in the actual work and got more involved with theoretical aspects of the universe. Rico and I decided that we would like to go south before cold weather started, and we left the rest of them."

Again she had told him nothing. He sighed imperceptively. Either there was nothing, or she was extremely clever. He made a point of glancing at his watch then and decided to re-read the reports while she awaited the next question.

And her mind returned to that other day so far in the past.

"This is Aleslix," Chris' voice was filled with tender pride as he grasped the boy by the shoulders and looked at him soberly for a moment before introducing him.

Sonny felt the mutual affection of the old man and the boy pervade the ancient log house. The boy was tall and slender, quite dark and aquiline. She felt a moment of intense pity well up in her and she looked questioningly at Chris. He nodded firmly and

she led the boy into the living room, without another look at the pain in Chris' eyes that he was so sure he had kept hidden. The boy obeyed docilely. He had been told by Chris that she was his mistress from that moment; that she would order him to do things that might hurt; that certainly would humiliate; that might appear to be without reason—but he was to do them. He accepted stoically, without murmur.

LATER, AS she inspected his head now bare of all hair, she asked him why he was willing to take punishment for another man. She listened closely to his answer. Anything he said was recorded for her to study. She had to know him as intimately as was humanly possible, his every mood, every gesture, every heart beat.

"With my people there is a legend," he said in his sweet, clear voice that used the English words as if they were delicate crystal ornaments that might break should he stumble over them in any respect. "This legend says that one

day there will be a new nation of the Cheyenne. One of the Cheyenne will go far beyond the Sun and found a new nation, and it will be more powerful and more prolific than the old. And when the Cheyenne are vanishing from the Earth will this thing come to pass." He shrugged as if to say, *so be it*.

Sonny felt herself quail before his penetrating gaze that accepted with so much faith the legends of his fathers. Already he was different from the boy she had met four weeks earlier. His hair was gone for good. He had proved to be an extremely good subject for hypnotism, and that made her job easier; but still it was telling on him. He was tired, yet uncomplaining, his conscious mind trying to assimilate all that she was teaching his subconscious mind, as he slept under hypnosis.

Another time she asked, "Have you ever been fingerprinted, Aleslix?"

And he laughed. "That is for the white man. Long ago, my forefathers decided that they must sustain the Chey-

enne strain. And to do this they knew they had to stay in the mountains and live as the Cheyenne had lived since life began. This they have done. We are in no books, nor are we on the records of the reservation. We are still the Cheyenne of the mountain."

"But this great friendship for Dr. Christianson, how did that come about?" She looked at the three-dimensional game he was learning to manipulate, and quickly looked away from it. Rico had made it, saying that it would help if Slix could duplicate something like it later. To help prove his aliveness.

THE BOY didn't stop his busy fingers, as he made the colored beads climb, seemingly of their own volition, up a wire and fall once more in a new pattern on a bottom rung. Rico had said that he had read of something like it somewhere, and had tried to figure it out. In the book, the beads were made to disappear into another dimension, he admitted, but he hadn't been able to do that. Sonny had the feeling that they might, under

the boy's patient manipulation.

"One day," his mellow voice intoned, "my grandfather and Dr. Christianson both came to a great cave together. They both felt the spirit of it and not knowing the other was there each promised the spirit to try to preserve that cave from the greedy fingers of the miners. It was such a cave that the gods might have built for their pleasures, with shiny walls and smooth floors of a whiteness that hurt the eyes. When they met outside, each had the feeling that he must kill the other in order to keep his promise, but the spirit came to them and they knew the secret was still to be. They became friends, and my father came to know that the spirits had arranged for the Cheyenne to thus meet the man who would make the trip beyond the Sun possible for the Cheyenne."

As Sonny worked, so did the others. They doubted and were in turn jubilant at the thought of the absolute success their plans must have. They grew wan from lack of sleep, until Sonny put them all on

sedatives for an entire week. They had been amazed at the completeness of the laboratory Dr. Christianson had assembled through the years, but later they cursed it for its niggardly supplies. They improvised and experimented with impossible substitutes. And finally they completed the first of their models. And a second, better, more capable. And a third. All handmade. All very flimsy from the improvisation. All successful. After six and a half months, they had to disband. They couldn't wait too long, not long enough to iron out some of the kinks, but they had to act. The war might break out sooner than they planned on; and if it did, their plans were automatically scrapped. Once the world was enmeshed in war, no outside threat, or outside treat, could capture or even entice the minds of men again.

THE ATTORNEY GENERAL knew all about the arrests made in September. He wasn't satisfied somehow with the information he had; but since he had personally inter-

viewed all those connected with the arrest and the immediate happenings that followed, he had to accept them. He reviewed it in his mind as he studied the expressionless face of the woman across the desk from him.

Seven months after they had fled the desert town, Sonny and Rico were picked up, registered as man and wife in a Mexican hotel. If they had wanted to draw attention from the remaining members of their party, they succeeded quite well. Rico's wife divorced him before he was even arraigned for complicity in the assault of the guards and stealing government property. Her picture made headlines in every paper in the country. The betrayed woman, holding an infant, leading two more. And next to it a picture of Sonny, looking almost squat in her white coat, her mouth showing as even more crooked than it actually was by the photographer's angle. Rico wouldn't talk.

Not so with Sonny. She talked from the moment of her arrest until she was isolated in prison. She described

the downfall of Chris, his mental deterioration after his escape from the desert research town, his pitiful attempts toward completing a stellar drive, his final complete breakdown. She marked the map they brought her to show exactly where the Wyoming hideout of Chris and the remaining scientists was located. They were all picked up quickly at the rickety farmhouse with its poorly equipped lab stocked mostly with junk. At least the story that made the papers was that they were all apprehended. The detective in charge was so sure of finding the missing two that he felt no qualms about the release. But Claud Osterly of the yellow hair, and Keith Donalds, had gone horseback riding and had never come back. Wyoming is a big state and has a lot of places that make for good hiding; the search was abandoned before too long a time. However, these two were unimportant as compared with the ones apprehended; such was the general feeling about it.

"Look, Rico, we want to help you. We know from Dr.

Tomaris that you were unwilling to go along with him, but that your personal affection and misplaced loyalty to Dr. Christianson forced you to change your mind. We're not interested in your personal life at all and are willing to forget all about the illegal entry into Mexico. What the government wants to do is give you a full pardon if you'll place yourself under Dr. Stanton's orders and work with him." The young attorney smiled and opened his palms in a gesture that asked, what more could you want?

RICO LOOKED at him with contempt. "Stanton! He should take orders from me."

"We know that, Rico. He is no match for you, but he is loyal to the government, and he is trusted. After you have proved yourself again, no doubt, you would become head of Operation 5000. It has bogged down badly."

Rico laughed then, and there was a savagery in it. "OK, I'll make you space missiles if that's what you want. But I want Harrison and Demarco with me. Have you lo-

cated Claud or Keith yet? I'd like them also."

"Not yet, but we will. The team will be reunited, with the exception of Dr. Christianson. He is in a sanitarium, you know. But the rest of you will be working together again as of old."

"I didn't know that about Chris. How is the old guy?" Rico looked up anxiously from the pardon he was reading.

"Suffering from delusions of persecution, I believe. Thinks he had the problem licked when he was stopped. Keeps muttering to himself, and anyone else who will listen, that another day or two would have done it." Now that he had accomplished his mission the lawyer was friendlier, and a trifle smug. Later, reading the transcript of the interview, the Attorney General was enraged. The first sure clue that something was wrong had gone unnoticed. Rico had known that Claud and Keith were still missing—and the fact had never been publicized.

Sonny was watched as she read the brief message on the card twice before she carelessly tossed it away. There was

a curious smile on her lips as she stared out the window at the swirling snow. 'Merry Christmas', she repeated the message to herself and her smile was content. There wasn't a name or anything else to it, just the holiday greeting. She fell asleep with the picture of the white snow emphasized by the black bars in her mind's eye. The watcher reported the incident, but could make nothing of it. The Attorney General had it listed as clue number two.

THE SANITARIUM doctor pursed his lips thoughtfully. The card could do no harm, and it might bring a reaction from the old man. The orders were to leave him alone—no therapy, no treatment. Nothing. Just keep him comfortable and quiet, they had said. He decided to take the card up personally.

"Good morning, Doctor. How are you today?" He glanced briefly at the messed room, the unmade bed and the scribbled papers that cluttered Christianson's desk. There definitely had been no improvement.

Chris asked peevisly, "Why can't I get the apparatus I ordered? I've been waiting for over a week for those things, and all I get is excuses."

"It takes time, Doctor. It takes time. Here's some mail for you." He watched closely as the old man gave a disinterested glance at the Christmas card and dropped it to the floor.

The old man was working feverishly at a drawing as the doctor left. He didn't raise his head, but he smiled. And the smile was photographed, and later viewed by the Attorney General who didn't smile.

Rico was again at the bar making wet circles on the plastic top with his glass. "You get a card?" He asked Harrison, but his gaze took in Demarco. The three men raised their glasses in unison and made a silent toast.

Harrison grinned sardonically as Dr. Stanton joined them, his face red from the heat outside. "We're toasting Christmas, Doctor. Will you join us?"

Stanton looked at them sus-

piciously, but he selected a drink and raised his glass with them. He said irritably, "If we don't get something done, we'll be in this hole next Christmas, too."

DEMARCO looked at him in surprise, "Why, Dr. Stanton, I thought that we'd made pretty good progress during the past few weeks."

"Yeah, Stanton, what do you expect?" Harrison shrugged and added, "Considering the mess things were in, we've done fairly well. It isn't easy working with a security man looking and breathing down your back all the time."

"I know, I know." Stanton agreed surprisingly. "It upsets everyone—but after what Dr. Christianson did before, we can't take any chances. Who'd have thought he'd be insane enough to destroy all that work?" He refused the offer of another drink saying that he wanted to look alert when his call came in from Washington.

"He's shaken," Rico said absently. He was thinking of the baby he had never seen.

It seemed that the closer they got to Christmas, the more his thoughts strayed to his family. He wondered if she knew how close the war was moving to them, and doubted it; no one seemed to know outside official circles. Another month or two, and one side or the other would be prepared; and whichever side got ready first would make the stab for control of Mars. Either would scream preventative war.

"They must be applying the thumbscrews to Stanton for results. Some people just won't believe that it takes time to make interplanetary missiles." Demarco said seriously, laughing inwardly. He knew that his every word was on record to be heard again by others.

The Attorney General had fumed when he assembled all the reports. Coincidence, some said, but he knew better; a signal had been given to all concerned. The cards had been identical. Deep, brilliant blue background alive with swarms of glittering stars, and larger than the rest, seemingly beckoning was the Christmas

Star with the single word 'Hope' on it.

III

CHRISTMAS came and went; and the first day of the new year, the thing was sighted. The first time, it was over Chicago, where it hovered for a few minutes before it shot straight up into the air and disappeared out over the lake. The next sighting came from Quebec. Canada sent up some jets after it, and along with the U. S. Vetos they scoured the skies; but again it was lost as it climbed, made an acute right turn and headed south again. From that time until five in the afternoon, some six hours, it was reported over New York, Washington, Denver and California. It was circular, and had impossible speed and manuevrability. It was the closest a saucer had been for nearly twenty years, when the world had last been panicked by them.

Then came the flash that startled the world. It had been brought down by the controversial firing device known as

Racamaf, the radar controlled automatic magnetic field. Furthermore, it was brought down intact, without visible damage. After that came nothing more about the alien ship; censorship had taken over with a firm hand.

The Major in command cautioned, "Keep your guns out, but don't fire unless I give the word. We want whatever is in there alive. And we want the ship the way it is." His men had it surrounded, and overhead hovered a Veto—the vertical takeoff rocket ship—just in case the alien somehow managed to get in the air again. This time the Veto had a fix on him and wouldn't lose him again. The magnetic field should be enough, however, to prevent any takeoff; it bound the saucer as securely to the earth as if the ship had grown there.

THERE WAS no movement from the ship or its occupants. The major waited. Eventually the door, wherever it was, must open, and whatever was inside must emerge. There could be no working parts of metal doing their job

inside, and it would get hot; the air would get stale, probably very quickly, considering the surprising smallness of the ship.

Then something moved. It was a part of the dull covering of the ship. It slid back from a small aperture that must have been comparable to a porthole of a boat. There was nothing else. The major made a sign. Six separate men took aim and fired gas into the opening. And after a brief waiting period, the major made another sign and a small detachment ran to the ship and, concealing themselves from the porthole by the very curve of the ship itself, began to feel along it, seeking the door. One of them shouted excitedly, "Here it is, sir. It's opened a little, must be damaged."

Without awaiting further orders, he kicked at it and it sprung open all the way. There on the floor of the ship lay a man. In one hand he was limply holding what looked like a ball of dark metal. It was all that was on him.

The major was by the door itself by now and he ordered

crisply, "Bring him out and put that thing somewhere where it will be safe. It might be a bomb." He took it from the man and watched as they carried the still body of the strange pilot toward the main force of the army. He was still standing by the door when the ship blew up with a mushrooming cloud that glowed yellow and orange and blue before it began dispersing. He was decorated posthumously, amid a good deal of wondering if the tiny ball he had held had, in fact, been a bomb. As yet the government couldn't make them that powerful—not that small, anyway.

THEY STUDIED the man carefully. He was tall, six feet five, and he weighed a scant 170. He was completely hairless, and had the look of extreme youth for such a dangerous, exciting job as interstellar pilot implied. So far as they were concerned, he was speechless; since his capture, he had uttered no word, made no sound. Occasionally there was the gleam of understanding in his black eyes, but always it vanished when they

approached him. They were awed by him; they wouldn't admit it even to themselves, but they feared him—or rather, what he represented.

"Any change, Doctor?" General Vine was from intelligence, and he wanted the prisoner turned over to his department. He was confident that his men could get something out of him.

"No. According to all our tests, he's exactly the same as every other man on Earth. Holds out still, but he can speak. And he has shown evidence of understanding precisely what we say when we talk in his presence." The doctor hid his scorn for the general poorly. His was an academic interest, whereas the army had entirely different motives for making the stranger talk, if they could.

Very softly, the general asked, "How much longer do you think you can hold him, Doctor? You've had him three weeks with no results. There are ways and ways, you know."

THE DOCTOR shrugged. He knew as well as the

general that, at any moment, he could expect orders to release the man to the army. The doctor felt sure that the stranger's immunity to drugs was a temporary, chemical thing. One that, moreover, could be expected to wear off in time; but to prove his theory he needed time—and that was the precious commodity that the government would not allow any man during the present crisis. He sighed and hoped that the following day wouldn't bring the new orders. One more time he requested the aid of Dr. Sonya Tomaris, now serving time in the women's penitentiary.

"Fraid not, Doc. She's not trusted any more. You know that."

"But I don't understand. The others were allowed to return to work—why not she?" Dr. Greenfield was sure that, with her help, he could gain the confidence of the alien.

"Because their work was considered vital for a classified government project, whereas she was replaceable."

"That's what you think. Dr. Tomaris has the finest brain

for this type thing to be found anywhere. She specialized enough to write several books on this very kind of problem. She had a chapter on drug tolerance and resistance. She proved in theory, that over a length of time, a person could build up a tolerance and a resistance to any drug made by man. Including the almighty pentathol."

General Vine felt the dig at that, for he had suggested the use of truth serum, his only concrete suggestion. He knew all about Sonny's book. One of his subordinates had brought it to his attention; and even while he had been talking with Greenfield, he knew that the woman they had mentioned was awaiting the presence of the prisoner to try her theories on personally. He packed his things that night, confident that the next day would bring the orders that he knew would come.

SONNY DIDN'T like the general, and made no effort to conceal her dislike. "I'll try," she had said simply. Then she added, "if you will

stay away, and if you won't bother me." She lighted her cigaret and exhaled thoughtfully, "This will be delicate and it must be kept confidential. None of your men must be aware of our methods, nor must they be allowed to view the prisoner at all. He is to be completely isolated, except for myself and Dr. Greenfield. That includes you also, General." She looked at him directly and again blew smoke in his direction.

"Certainly, Doctor. I won't get in your way, but I'll expect a daily report. That's an order." The general was cursing her inwardly, but he had been assured that she was the best for it. Greenfield had been ordered along by the Pentagon, so there wasn't much he could do about it.

"Fine, General, fine. And one more thing. We are to have at our disposal anything we order. Right?" she asked pleasantly, but her very tone of voice and assurance told him that she knew she was boss, and that he would do her bidding.

"That's correct." He looked

at her with hatred and remembered that she had been in prison for nearly four months, and would be yet if he hadn't asked for her. It didn't help him much, but he recalled it consciously whenever he felt her superiority threaten to overwhelm him.

THE ATTORNEY GENERAL reviewed all this in his mind and knew that Sonya Tomaris couldn't have known that she would be called in to question the stranger. Her participation had come through the influence of too many people who didn't even know her, except through her work. He asked curiously, "Do you mind telling me, Doctor, why you were so willing to treat the alien?"

"I had made intensive studies of the practice of brain washing and menticide. And that seemed the time to put some of my theories to the test." As usual, her answer was simple and direct; she didn't try to cover up with rationalizations.

"Then it was with no thought of being a patriot and doing your best to aid your govern-

ment in times of crises that made you take on the job?" There was repugnance in his voice.

"That's right. But didn't your own experts admit that I used the only way to get him to tell us about himself and his world?"

"Ah, yes. I believe they did say that he might have died finally without speaking if you hadn't broken him. But they don't know for sure. They think that he might have capitulated of his own accord had he been convinced of the good will of his captors." He wanted desperately to believe that her actions had been necessary, but on the other hand he wanted her to be wrong. He had viewed the films of the whole treatment, along with the Surgeon General and several other psychiatrists and doctors. They all agreed that, so far as physical damage was done, she hadn't harmed the man; but they agreed also, that she had effectively killed his brain—or at least, the part of it that made him his own master.

Quietly Dr. Tomaris said, "In one of my books, I went

into the matter thoroughly of how a mind can be made to open and expose all its secrets. It has been the subject of many other books, but I believe the practice itself had been discontinued long before either of us heard of it personally. As a matter of fact, the U. N. outlawed its use after the last war. Thus the reason for the secrecy I insisted on having."

With a gleam in his eye the Attorney General pounced, "And didn't you also write that anything that could be brought forth from a brain could have been put there in the first place by much the same sort of treatment?"

"Yes, I did. Naturally, I have no empirical knowledge of this, and it is merely a theory of mine. After Slix broke down, if you will recall, I cautioned against accepting all his statements until further treatment."

"And were overruled, as I remember," he added and felt himself outmaneuvered once more. It was in the record, how she had protested that perhaps the memories were

false, that after more treatment, he could be made more dependable. Greenfield in particular had demanded that they accept what was to him the immutable truth.

IV

SONNY FORCED her own memories to be quiet as she remembered, reluctantly.

The man looked about groggily for the sound of her voice, and failed to find the source. He shook his head doggedly and continued the endless pacing the treadmill demanded of him. His feet were swollen; he was haggard and red-eyed from lack of sleep. She wanted to run to him and cradle him in her arms and weep for him.

Dr. Greenfield lifted his head from his cupped hands, and fixed his accusing eyes on the strange woman he was helping. She was watching the tragic figure dragging his feet along the treadmill without a trace of emotion on her face. She hadn't moved for the six hours that this had been going on. Now she looked up at the insistence of his stare and

asked sardonically, "Shocked, Dr. Greenfield?"

"I'm quitting. This is inhuman, and I'll have no part in it." He stood up, relieved by his impassioned words, eager to be out of the place and begin the task of erasing the unforgettable scenes from his mind, if it were possible.

"Really, Doctor? And just who do you think is going to open the door for you and let you walk out? The general? Don't be absurd. He'd order you shot in the back before he'd let you leave and spread this story about." She motioned him toward his seat again. "Just be a good boy and it will all be over before another twenty-four hours. He talked a little this morning." She thought, *He's doing it too well. He shouldn't hold out much longer. They wouldn't be suspicious if he began talking this minute.* She hoped desperately that he would, before his poor body and mind did break down.

"What did he say?" In spite of himself, the other doctor was excited.

"I really couldn't say. It was gibberish so far as I was

concerned. Did you think he'd use a tongue that must be as alien to him as our concept of his would be? Obviously he understands us, but how well he can speak English is another matter." She motioned with the back of her hand toward the wall and then turned her attention again to the screen that let her watch the hairless figure. "They're on the record—his words, I mean. He was only half-conscious when he uttered them."

DR. GREENFIELD, feeling nothing but self-hatred for it, but too curious and interested to stop himself, turned on the playback that let him view the morning's happenings.

The man was standing, facing the nightmarishly-striped wall. His face was taut and strained, and a pulse in his temple throbbed almost audibly as he fought to keep his eyes from following the stripes up and down. One of his arms was outstretched, and only then did Greenfield see the second figure in the room. It was Sonny administering a hypodermic syringe. In revulsion

he recalled her words, "We will use the old technique of complete exhaustion to win him. He must not be allowed to sleep, and when his body shows signs of collapse we will revive him with stimulants. The amphetamine derivatives will add to his confusion, as will the alieness of the room. Also, to our benefit, they will bring about almost complete amnesia. He will be unmarked by the experience and eventually will have forgotten it entirely. We will do nothing that will hurt him physically, or mark him in any way." So she had explained her demand for the drugs to the General, who had eyed her with a new respect.

Greenfield was startled by her voice as she said suddenly, "It was just after the last injection that he began to talk a little. His resistance must be wearing low now. You were right about that, by the way. His people must prepare their men for possible interrogation. I wonder who they think might get hold of one to do the interrogating?"

"Us, naturally." Greenfield said sarcastically.

"I don't think so. They must have a very deep scorn for our methods of interception by now. After all, they've been watching us for nearly a hundred years that we know of, and probably a good deal longer than that. If they feared us, they wouldn't have sent in this so close." She fell silent as she again fastened her own gaze on the weary figure in the little room, and her body ached as she knew his must. She had planted the first seed in Greenfield's mind of a third party; now it was up to him.

GREENFIELD was merely her relief for the little sleep she forced herself to take. Any resentment he might have felt for the subordinate role he was forced to play had long been forgotten as his repugnance for the act itself grew. Now he considered her words carefully; they had the ring of truth in them. Were there two different groups out there able to cross interstellar distances as though it were a pond? He decided to bring up the question with the general. He had noticed that Sony

never volunteered anything to him, and he felt that this time it was important enough for him to break his own self-imposed silence with the man.

Sonny flicked a switch that started the record again, and in haste Greenfield fled. Over and over the words would play, "What is your purpose here? Where are you from? How did your ship operate? We know you are capable of speech and understand us. You are very tired, very tired, very tired. You will sleep after you tell us. What is your purpose here? Where are you from?..."

Sonny listened to the slamming door with no change of expression, her eyes not leaving Slix. She had prepared him well for his ordeal, never thinking for a minute that she would be the one to carry it out a second time. She had explained each step to him time after time, so that he would be prepared for it— Had even put him through a similar experience to test his endurance. She wondered why it was so much harder on her this time than it had been before, when

she had thought she couldn't go through with it. Then, only the reassurance of Chris and the others had stiffened her resolve when she had been on the verge of giving it up. Now the mental anguish of the boy, plus his weariness, plus the hatred and contempt of those around her added to her burden of guilt. When Slix had spoken out earlier in the day, it had been with no recognition of her. His befuddled brain had reacted automatically, with no regard for his previous training. Now Sonny couldn't afford to leave him at all for fear that, when the break did come, she might not be present to halt the flow should it be uncontrolled.

GENERAL VINE said, "Dr. Tomaris, it's been sixty five hours now. Greenfield says that it's dangerous to continue much longer this way." The general frowned worriedly. It was the first time since the beginning that he had come to this room, and it frightened him. He didn't want the prisoner to die; but, on the other hand, if he

wouldn't talk of his own accord... For the first time since he had been assigned to this particular case, he regretted his availability to take it. This woman was a she-devil. How she could smile so pleasantly and smoke her constant cigarettes while that man was being reduced to a shadow of himself was a mystery to the general. Hardness he had seen before; brutality he had seen; ruthlessness, and lack of feeling—all were present in varying degrees in the army. But her scientific detachment was giving him nightmares.

He knew it could just as easily be General Allan Vine in that room, and she would proceed just as equably as she was now doing. "He tried to keep his eyes from straying to the room itself, and knew that it would be part of his dreams henceforth. It was ten feet long and three feet wide. The ceiling cleared the man's head by less than an inch; and when he was allowed to lie down it lowered to maintain that distance. And everywhere were the stripes. Black stripes against the glowing

white. In his mind, Vine imagined watching the stripes until they began winding around and around and managed to wrap themselves about his body and start choking. He shivered at the thought of adding this feature to his nightmares, and awakening again with the salty pools of perspiration about his trembling body.

SHE HAD explained the entire process in the beginning, "First there is the strangeness—the striped room and*lowering ceiling. And the fact that he's alone constantly. No sacrifice he might make will be known. He might as well be dead already for all his people know. By removing hope, the will is removed. Also, he is confused. A ten minute sleep might be hours or days. Irregular meals—fatigue—drugs—all add to his time confusion. He probably thinks a few hours are a day. Finally he will come to see in me a loving parent, promising rest and sleep and an end of torment if he'll be good and win it." She had spread her

hands wide apart, palms down, "That's it. Menticide. He will find it compulsory to talk, and once he starts, he won't be able to stop again. He'll find that he must keep pleasing me."

Vine flinched, thinking what would happen to his career if this thing didn't work and ever became known. Since the U.N. had outlawed such practices, and since the United States did live by the laws set down by the U.N. and later adopted by the World Government Convention, Allan Vine's army career would end and he probably would go to prison. His superior had said the methods used were Vine's business, thus leaving it entirely in his hands. He put such thoughts from his mind and listened to Dr. Tomaris.

"I have told you, General, my methods are not to be questioned. He will talk quite soon now, I believe. And all this will fade from his mind as he once more gets enough rest." She smiled lopsidedly at him and arose to accompany him to the door, forestalling any more questions by saying

that he was merely keeping her from her work by his presence.

DR. GREENFIELD watched her resume her chair with implacable eyes. Quietly he said, "When this is over, even if I have to wait ten years for the opportunity, I'm going to publish a report of this whole thing. You'll be ruined." He expected no answer having grown used to her habit of ignoring anything she didn't wish to hear. "He can't keep it up much longer—you know that. His heart won't stand it."

"His heart is fine. Better than any I've ever examined," she said absently, watching the man standing in the center of the room. His eyes were swollen, as if he'd been weeping continuously for hours. His head was unsteadily swaying as he watched the stripes; and from her point of sanity, Sonny could almost see them winding in and out as he must be doing. She was worried about him; perhaps she had pushed him too far after all. Perhaps her presence was

making it impossible for him to break until too late to save his sanity. Even as she watched and worried, a low moan broke from his lips and a gush of words followed. The words were not English, nor were they Indian. Sonny knew with a shock that, through his torture, his training had not been forgotten.

"This is it!" she cried to Greenfield and hurried into the room. A gentle look of pity and understanding softened her face as she approached the man. She put one arm about his shoulders and whispered soft words to him, words that were inaudible to Greenfield. The man began sobbing in his hands, and in disgust at her callousness, Greenfield turned to the intercom set and contacted the general.

V

THE ATTORNEY GENERAL didn't question Sonya Tomaris about any of the rest; it had been out of her hands entirely afterward. Slix had in-

sisted on her presence at all times, but otherwise she had been merely an accessory.

She had been right when she said he'd tell everything. They could fill several books with the things he told. All but the key questions. How was his ship made? What fuel? How did it operate? The action of it, he described perfectly and made them glance at one another with awe; but as for why or how it did it, he looked as puzzled as they and shrugged his shoulders.

Greenfield had folded nearly at the same time as Slix. He sought release from his own guilt in the treatment through an illusory world that was filled with kind, gentle people, and he refused to leave it again. Sonny said that, in time and with good care, he could be cured; but his usefulness to them was finished. They were all relieved, after they considered it. His constant threats to publish had kept them on edge, and had made isolation the only answer for him. That posed new problems in a country where imprisonment of an eminent

doctor was sure to draw enquiries.

Dr. Tomaris had sat in on all the conferences because Slix had insisted on it; on the one or two occasions that she had been denied the room, he had obstinately refused to talk. She explained, "He looks upon me as his savior from a darkness that he doesn't understand and doesn't fully remember but he is still dependent on me for help in combatting it, should it return. It will be a temporary thing, finally passing as his sense of independence grows again."

THE ATTORNEY GENERAL closed his eyes and with his mind heard again that conference. Rico was saying to Stanton, "I don't get it any more than you do, but we've got to keep trying." He ran his fingers through his hair and moaned, "If only Dr. Christianson were here. This would be his meat."

Stanton made an irritable sound and asked Slix again, "But how did the anti-gravity field operate? What was the basis? Where did it derive its

power?" He shook his head as Slix began to draw complex figures on a paper. "That doesn't help!" he shouted. "Can't you break it down?"

Sonny interjected smoothly, "He's not an engineer nor a scientist. Just a pilot. Can our pilots explain their planes in simple terms so that children can understand? Don't you see, he doesn't know the theory of it. He was taught to fly it, and that he knows. I can fly a Veto, but I couldn't explain it or duplicate it." She resumed reading, as if she hadn't spoken.

Stanton threw up his hands in despair and looked questioningly at Rico. He raised his eyebrows and said resignedly, "The only thing to do is keep trying until we hit something that he can recognize, I suppose. Old Chris shouldn't have destroyed his drawings and figures. They took him too many years to complete to have been lost in less than five minutes."

Stanton asked slowly, more of Dr. Tomaris than of Rico, "Do you think he could make new ones?" She didn't even look up.

SO MUCH in the record that was coincidental. So much that a rational explanation could allay, but so much more that was too pat. The Attorney General had Stanton's word for it that he had finally suggested the visit to Christianson with no pressuring from anyone. And that, since he knew as well as anyone how Old Chris was the granddaddy of interstellar flight to begin with, it had been a mistake to imprison him in the first place. And whether it was called a sanitarium or a hotel, it had amounted to a prison.

And Christianson's behavior. Naturally he'd kept saying all along that he was working on his drive, but no one believed him. He'd said other things, too, that had a counteracting effect on his lucid statements. But all the confusion of his mind had vanished immediately when he'd learned that he could go back to work.

Chris had looked from one to another of them in bewilderment. "Naturally I can make the drawings. That's all I've tried to do since they

brought me to this place, but they won't furnish any materials for me. They treat me as a criminal when all I wanted to do was complete my plans."

The Attorney General began hurrying now, as if to finish off a particularly bad day. The broadcast had really been the last link. There had been a round table discussion of the alien, with him present answering questions. And then had come the statement about his home planet being called Aleslix, and hence his name. The Secretary of Defense had been on the panel, and until now he had merely smiled and let the others both ask and answer the questions being raised. Now, however, at a question he was the one to answer.

"If you don't mind, I'll try to answer that from information we already have received from our distinguished guest from another world. At the present time, there are two inhabited planetary systems other than ours—and even as we talk about them, they are engaged in an all-out war against one another. As you

can see, and our doctors confirm, Slix is a man. A definite humanoid type with the same organs that we on Earth have. The other race is not humanoid. That much is known. For hundreds of years, these two groups have watched us in our stumbling progress and have waited patiently for the time when Earth would be worth capturing, as far as the second group was concerned, and worth befriending, as far as Slix's people were concerned." He paused to give the words emphasis and drank from the glass before him. This was the purpose of the broadcast and he was its star, albeit a grim one.

HE TOOK a deep breath. "To continue, there are two powers, each equally powerful and each equally convinced that he has the right to win out in such a war. Victory for one side means capture by aliens of mind and body, and by the other to be befriended by people like ourselves, but more advanced technically than we. They have waited for this long so

that we might develop ourselves to the point where there would be mutual independence, and not one world clinging to another for its education and means of livelihood."

He had said more and Slix had gone through an intensive grilling after that, but that was the gist of it. Afterward had come the world-wide huddle; and after that had come the plan. And with the plan, cooperation and a willingness to give of scientists, or raw materials, or anything any nation had. Earth had to develop an interstellar drive, and had to assert herself as a universal power, not merely a plum grown ripe for the picking.

Nearly seven years had passed since the first interstellar ship had left to find Aleslix and declare Earth's intention to aid in their fight for mutual survival.

And then the message. There was no Aleslix; no other civilization. Only seven planets circling a sun. Seven worlds, three with vegetative life, four without. Further word would have to wait for

the Earth to come from around the sun whose magnetic influence made communication impossible with the ship.

Someone had hoaxed the world. Someone or some group would be accountable to the world government at its next convention, and the Attorney General wanted to make sure it would be a matter of individuals before it—not the United States government that stood there. He said as much to Sonny.

"I warned them particularly against accepting his story at face value," she repeated simply. And she waited.

"Dr. Tomaris, do you deny any knowledge of this? We intend to question that young man again when he gets back, you know. And with your magnificent record to guide us, I'm convinced that he'll tell the real story this time."

SONNY RETURNED to the ranch where she cared for Chris. The Attorney General hadn't meant to tell her their plans, but she would have guessed anyway. She waited

until the first day of June to tell Chris. The celebration, cancelled until further notice, was to have begun June first she reflected.

"They were picked up by Mars on the sub etheric beam several months ago, Chris." Sonny walked slowly pushing the old man's wheel chair carefully over the grass into the shade of the imported elm tree. Trees in Wyoming just didn't manage to seed themselves, it seemed.

"What do you think they'll do to us, Sonny?" Chris' eyes still had a twinkly quality that gladdened her heart. His legs were useless to him since his stroke of two years past; and his heart wasn't strong and regular as it had been even five years ago. But his eyes were the eyes of a young man full of life and the power to enjoy living.

"I don't know. We started all this such a long time ago. Maybe nothing." She sat opposite him and smiled sadly, "For us, what does it matter? But for Slix, who dreamed of founding a nation, it will come as a hard blow to take."

"He's a man now, Sonny, and he will have to take it if it comes that way." His gaze went past her to the distant mountains, "Seven years," he ruminated, on it, "and how many ships have gone out since then? Two a year for seven years. They'll not find Aleslix, but they'll find the stars. And they'll find new worlds to populate." He fell asleep even as he talked and tenderly Sonny watched over him as he slept.

They had all played their parts well. Rico—his wife had never accepted any story to account for his being in Mexico with Sonny. Slix—the Cheyenne boy, who had spent seven months learning how to take punishment and how to live a lie. Claud and Keith—who had never come back after riding off into the hills on their horses. They had met and stayed with Slix until it was time for each of them to take their "saucer" to the right place for the takeoff, so that as many people as possible would see them, and jump to the conclusion that it was one ship they all viewed. She

smiled as she remembered their fear that the "saucers" wouldn't hold together long enough to be viewed. Harrison and Demarco—had worked for the ten years, never giving a hint that they were a part of the conspiracy. And Chris—who wouldn't let his mission in life be denied him.

And as for herself, she had done inhuman things to the boy both before and after his capture. Mostly she didn't sleep well for the dreams of his anguish her mind refused to forget, not believing in the maxim that the ends justify the means. And there were others—the doctor who now sold insurance and couldn't account for one year of his life; and a general who was in some distant outpost now. All because a man had a dream, and the world was too bent on self-destruction to hear and see it with him.

Gently she covered his withered legs with a blanket, and whispered, "Sleep well, Chris. You gave man the stars in spite of himself. They can't take it away from you now."



There was a chance for a couple — man and wife — to stick it out for a term of service as Beacon Keepers on a hollowed-out asteroid IF they had hobbies. Well, Carradine loved to cook...and Sal decided that here was her chance to write *THE* novel. So it looked as if all would work out just fine...

SPACEMAN'S DELIGHT

by

A. Bertram Chandler

THERE WAS Carradine, who was Mate of the *Ceres Belle*, and Sal Perkins, who was editor of the women's pages of *The Martian Chronicle*. He was a tall man, Carradine—unusually tall for

a member of a service which tends to discourage excessive size in its officers. He was, however, thin to the point of skinniness so did not rob his ship of more than a few ounces of payload. Sal was slim, but

had to watch her diet carefully to stay that way. For the rest—she had auburn hair and deep brown eyes and everything that a desirable woman should have, and all in the right places.

Carradine wanted to marry her.

Carradine had left the Martian Mail Line because of her, had exchanged his fine, big ships for the little rust buckets owned by the Martian Mining Corporation and plying between the red planet and the Asteroid Belt, carrying stores and equipment out, metallic ores and other minerals home.

Carradine wanted to marry her, and she wanted to marry Carradine; but Sal had decided that the life of a spaceman's wife is not a good one, no matter what his trade. There was a waiting list a light year long for berths in the shuttle rockets running between Mars and the spaceports on Phobos and Deimos. There was a waiting list two light years long for pilots' jobs in the rocket planes that were the most commonly used means of public transport on Mars; and these waiting lists were filled with the names

of those who, like Carradine, had fallen in love with Martian girls and left the Martian Mail Line, thinking that service in the Corporation's ore carriers would give them more time with their women.

SAL WAS saying, "I want to marry you, Bill," as they sat together before the fire—an extravagance, but a pleasant one—in her apartment in Marsala. "I want to marry you, and badly. But I know you too well. Once you put that ring on my finger, you'll tend to lose interest in any job that will keep us together. You'll just let things drift."

"Perhaps you could show me," said Carradine slowly, "where to get a job. Perhaps you could tell me where to find one that pays the same money as I'm getting now. Perhaps you could tell me where to go looking for one in the few hours that it takes to get *Ceres Belle* discharged and loaded."

"Perhaps you could make a start by looking in the classified advertisements in the *Chronicle*," she said acidly. "At one time you used to go right through those pages eve-

ry time that you were in—now you've lost interest."

"Oh, all right," he growled. He picked up the paper from the low coffee table. He turned to the *Men Wanted* pages. Suddenly he stiffened. "Hello, the Astronautical Services Commission is running an ad... Tell me, Sal—would you be prepared to drop everything and come out to the Belt?"

"It all depends," she replied cautiously.

"The money's good. In a couple of years or so we should have saved enough to buy ourselves a small business of some kind."

"What is the job?" she asked.

BILL LOOKED thoughtful. "Beacon Keeper. As you know, the ships running through the Belt are dependent to a great extent upon radio beacons. Fully automatic beacons have been tried—but there are so many things that can go wrong to them, not the least common of these being damage by a meteorite. A single man has been tried—but he's far too liable to go round the bend. Teams of two, three,

four and even five men have been tried—and to the risk of madness has been added the risk of murder. There has been a buzz going round that the Commission is about to try a new approach. This is it."

"Either let me see the paper, Bill, or tell me."

"They're going to try manning the beacons with married couples. Oh, one could do a lot worse. The living quarters are hollowed out of the planetoids on which the beacons are sited, so are quite safe from meteoric collision. There's a hydroponics garden, and there are yeast and tissue culture vats. There's a fine supply of books and films and recorded music. Ideal homes in Space, that's what the beacons are. And the pay is fifteen hundred dollars a month—more than the two of us are making now—and there's nothing to spend it on."

"I could write my novel," she said.

"Yes. You could write your novel."

"Darling," she said, "this could be it. I want you to call the Commission at once—there's bound to be somebody on duty. We'll see if we can

have our interview this afternoon. Then, if it's successful, we'll go straight to the Registrar and make our relationship permanent, and you can put in your resignation from the Corporation."

"Are you sure, Sal?" he asked. "After all, you lead a full life here. You've got your job and you've got the city..."

"A provincial newspaper," she said, "in a hick town. Get on that 'phone at once. Sell yourself to them. Sell *us*."

SO IT WAS, a few weeks later, that Carradine and Sal were among the passengers in the Beacon Tender *Eddystone*. Like most of the other married couples in the ship they tended to resent the lectures that Captain Williams, *Eddystone's* Master, was all too ready and willing to give at the slightest provocation. After all—they were in love, and what did this grizzled bachelor know about love? When you are in love there is no boredom. Every word spoken by one's beloved is music, her every movement is the epitome of grace. Two together, shut up in a cave—a warm

cave, fitted with every modern convenience—and with the rest of mankind millions of miles away is the nearest approach to Eden that man and woman will ever know.

"It's the boredom that's the biggest enemy," Captain Williams was always saying. "You must have hobbies. That is essential. It can be putting ships in bottles, it can be carving soap—but you *must* have hobbies. If I'd had my way all you young people would never have had your contraceptive shots before leaving Mars—you'd find children the best hobby of all!"

"Spoken," said Carradine, on one occasion, "like a true bachelor."

WILLIAMS had replied, "I may be a bachelor, Carradine, but I can observe. I've had to clean up the mess on far too many of the beacon plane-toids since I've been on this service. I've had to bury the corpses of murdered men, and I've had to carry raving maniacs under restraint. Others I've carried back who've spent the full two years strumming on the keyboard of a piano or

a typewriter and who have had not only the accumulated pay to look forward to but the proceeds of the sale of some masterpiece. But they, I'm sorry to say, have been few and far between."

"Sal is writing a novel," said Carradine proudly.

"You should have said *the* novel. It will be a good one, too."

"And what do *you* propose to do?" asked Williams. "Repairs and adjustments to the beacon won't take long—neither will writing up the Official Log. Unless you know far more about Bio-Chemistry than the average spaceman you'll be well advised to stick strictly to the book as far as Hydroponics is concerned—which will make gardening a matter of routine. You must do something besides making love and reading Mrs. Carradine's manuscripts."

"As a matter of fact," said Carradine a little stiffly, "I *have* got a hobby."

"Indeed? What is it?"

"I cook."

"He can, too, Captain," said Sal.

Williams smiled. "Cookery's

one of my hobbies, too. Every now and again I persuade the Chef to give me a free hand in the galley—and nobody's died yet. Next time I take over the cuisine, Carradine, you'll have to come along and swap recipes with me."

"The woman's place, I suppose, is at her typewriter," said Sal.

"Too right," replied her husband.

BEACON 343 is lonely.

Beacon 343 is in the thick of the Drift, where ships rarely venture. At long intervals, there will be the distant flare of rocket drive against the weird, light-spangled sky of the Belt, and it may be seen in the unlikely event of a member's of the Beacon's crew being on the surface of the tiny world. At long intervals, a strange voice will crackle from the loudspeaker, and there will be a brief exchange of question and answer.

"*Lili Marlene*, Hawkins, Master, from Ceres City to Phobos. Can you hear me, 343, can you hear me?"

"You are coming in both loud and clear, *Lili Marlene*.

Have you anything to report?"

"Nothing to report, 343. Have you anything to report?"

"Nothing. But I have a request, *Lili Marlene*."

"Go ahead, 343."

"Please ask Captain Williams, of the *Eddystone*, to bring some more paper for my wife on his next call. It's for her novel. And ask him, too, to bring some more cookery books for me."

"It's as good as done, 343. All the best to you."

"And all the best to you, *Lili Marlene*. Give Mars our love."

BEACON 343 is lonely.

At long, but regular intervals the Beacon Tender *Eddystone* makes her rounds, nosing in carefully, carefully through the Drift, hanging at last above the rugged surface of the planetoid, her hull almost brushing the radio antennae. It is Williams, accompanied by one of his officers, who makes the landing and who hands over to Beacon Keepers their regulation stores and the extra items that they have requested. It is Williams who will sip in sometimes gen-

uine appreciation some home-made tippie brewed by a Beacon Keeper. It is Williams who, if time will permit, shares a meal with the lonely men and women.

And it was Williams who thought, for a long time, that the mixed crew experiment was working out well on 343.

The first time that he called he was received by both Carradine and Sal. When the three of them shed their spacesuits in the little living room he looked at the young man and woman curiously. They were fit, obviously. They were putting on weight, both of them. They were happy; they were pleased to see the Captain but would be pleased when he left them to their privacy. Carradine pressed a bulb of beer upon him which, Williams admitted, wasn't at all bad. Sal showed him a thick bundle of manuscript. Carradine produced a meal, cooked by himself, that was better than anything ever turned out by *Eddystone's* Chef—in fact, Williams thought, almost as good as anything that he could have done.

THE NEXT time that *Eddystone* called, Williams was

received only by Carradine. Sal was hard at work on her novel still—the clatter of her typewriter was clearly audible as Carradine and the Captain were talking in the living room, and sipping the quite palatable gin that Carradine had distilled.

Williams was rather shocked by her manner when she stopped work and came through. She had, quite clearly, reached the stage when she thought that all men were members of a conspiracy against all women. She refused a drink. She accused her husband of drinking while she was working and, by implication, accused Williams of aiding and abetting him. She refused to join her husband and the Captain in a meal. She went back to her typewriter.

"She gets that way," said Carradine. "The trouble is, she needs a hobby."

"She's got one, surely," said Williams.

"No," dissented the other. "Her novel was a hobby when she was a journalist—now she's making work of it."

"What about your cooking? (This is excellent lamb, by the

way—you must look after your cultures well.) Isn't that work too?"

"No," Carradine told him. "Maintaining the Beacon is work—this is just a hobby."

"Then why not let Mrs. Carradine take turns with the cooking? That will give her a hobby, too."

"We've tried that. But Sal's the worst cook in the Solar System, bar none—she always was. With her, it's like somebody who hasn't got green fingers trying to garden."

"Too bad," said Williams. "Thanks for the drink and the meal, anyhow. I must be going now."

"Sal!" called Carradine, "the Captain's leaving!"

The rattle of the typewriter ceased briefly.

"Goodbye," cried Sal, then resumed work at once.

ON HIS periodic visits to 343, Williams became used to not seeing Mrs. Carradine. Sometimes she would call out to him from her workroom; sometimes she never bothered. But there was always a drink for him and, if he wanted it, a meal. Carradine was ready

to eat at any time. He was putting on weight—had, in fact, developed an unsightly paunch. He was beginning to acquire the slightly greasy, slightly unhealthy look often exhibited by those who work with food.

But he was happy.

He had his hobby, and he was happy. He would have been just as happy, perhaps, if he had been alone on the beacon planetoid. He would be one of the few who would be genuinely sorry when their tour of duty was over—and now it was almost over.

Eddystone came nosing in through the Drift, her rockets flaring briefly as she avoided contact with those pieces of planetary debris that threatened collision with her hull. Her rockets flared again as she established herself in her orbit around the planetoid from which, like improbable vegetation, sprouted the metal antennae. A spacesuited figure was waving to the ship from the landing platform.

"We've timed our arrival just right," said Williams to his Chief Officer.

"How so, sir?"

"It's almost dinner time—

and Carradine is bound to ask me to share a meal with him. He's an excellent cook. I doubt that I'll ever get such meals again on 343—next trip, as you know, we bring their reliefs out."

"What about his wife?" asked the Mate.

"She doesn't cook. She's writing on a novel, or *the* novel. If it sells well, she should use the money to start a restaurant, with her husband in full charge of the galley. All the stores ready?"

"All ready, sir, in the airlock."

"The Third can give me a hand down with them. I'll send him back as soon as they're stowed."

SPACESUITED, using their pistol reactors, Williams and his Third Officer jetted from *Eddystone's* airlock, the bales and cartons dragging behind them on their towlines. The two men dropped to the landing platform, touched gloves with Carradine, then dragged the packages into the beacon's airlock. They removed their suits, checked the items, one by one, against the list held by

the Third Officer. Carradine scrawled his signature on the sheet.

Then... "A drink Captain?" asked Carradine. "And a bite to eat, perhaps?"

"Thank you," said Williams. "I think I will."

"What about the Third?"

"You know the Regulations as well as I do, Carradine. Not more than one officer to be absent from the ship at any time, in Space, except in cases of emergency."

"I'd better be getting back, sir," said the Third, tactfully and regretfully. He resumed his spacesuit. Williams and Carradine went through into the workshop, watched through the observation ports as the youngster jetted up to the waiting ship.

"Of course," said Williams, "what I have to avoid is giving the juniors the idea that you Beacon Keepers live like lords. There's enough wastage from the Service already. I let the Third come with me into 327. Welsh is the Keeper there—used to be with the Martian Mail, the same as you. He and his wife lead a cat and dog life, and are just sticking out for

the money. Neither of them can cook, either."

"You must," said Carradine, "have a good cook for this job."

HE LED THE way into the living room. He helped the Captain to strap himself into his chair. He returned with two bulbs of a pale amber fluid.

"Sherry," he said. "My own make. Not quite Tio Pepe, but not bad."

"Not bad at all," agreed Williams.

"We'll have a claret with the meal."

"How do you do it?" asked Williams admiringly.

"Is there any reason why one shouldn't grow grapes in the Hydroponics Room? And with modern forcing techniques..."

"Yes," agreed Williams. "There's far too much of people saying that you can't do this and that you can't do that in Hydroponics, when it's only a matter of working out the technique. The same applies to tissue cultures. Beef you can have. Poultry you can have. Mutton you can have. But pork? No. But why not?"

"Why not?" echoed Carradine. He went through to the galley. He returned with plates and eating utensils, two bulbs of red wine.

"Where's Mrs. Carradine?" asked Williams. "Isn't she joining us?"

"She's not eating these days," replied her husband. "Well, she is—but it's one of these special diets."

"Still working hard, I take it."

"Still working hard."

"PORK CUTLETS!" exclaimed the Captain. "Delicious! But how did you do it, Carradine?"

"There's such a thing," said the Beacon Keeper happily between mouthfuls, "as long pig..."

"Long pig?"

Suddenly Williams realized

what it meant. He dropped his knife and fork, let them drift unheeded. He fought to control his rising nausea.

"There's such a thing, too, as getting your own back," went on Carradine.

"I arrest you!" spluttered Williams. "Murder would have been bad enough, but *this*..."

"Finish your dinner," said Carradine, "and don't be a fool."

"And so it's too much for Captain Williams?" said Sal Carradine, coming slowly into the room. "I'm not surprised. I'm on a diet, Captain Williams, a strictly vegetarian diet. Do you know what this beast did? He said that he had to have pork for his cookery, so he took a tissue culture from his own thigh..."

Williams *was* sick.



Another Fine story by KATE WILHELM

The Trouble With Toys

is among the topnotch features in

FUTURE SCIENCE FICTION

The February issue is now on sale



EXPERIMENT

tend to be gaudy and lurid; they repel more potential readers than they attract (b) for the most part, they attract the wrong kind of reader—the person who is just looking for sensationalism, and who won't come back for more, if he finds serious science fiction inside the flashy cover (c) the true lover of science fiction is often embarrassed by the covers on the magazines he buys; and in the case of minors, often runs up against adult disapproval and prohibition solely on the grounds of the appearance of a magazine.

VETERAN science fiction readers, and those of you who have been following the "Yesterday's World of Tomorrow" series in our companion magazine, *Future Science Fiction*, know that the great cover controversy has been fought out in readers' columns since 1927. The two opposing sides have been those of Dignity and Eye Appeal.

Supporters of the Dignity faction have consistently maintained that (a) full-color covers

Supporters of the Eye Appeal faction restrict their objections to covers they consider poorly executed, or inappropriate for science fiction, contending that (a) they love vivid covers (b) such covers do at-

tract people with the imagination necessary to appreciate good science fiction; these readers often say that they, themselves, first came to science fiction on the strength of a bright, fantastic cover which aroused their curiosity and interest (c) persistence and reason on the part of juvenile readers can overcome adult disapproval, and the initially-objecting parent has often become a convert.

THE PUBLISHER and editor remains in the middle. The publisher wants to attract a large audience with each issue; he realizes that a large percentage of sales derive from "transient" interest. *Everyone who buys and enjoys an issue will not necessarily buy the next issue. You cannot be certain of repeaters.* The editor wants to hold the readers attracted to the current issue, and attract more to the issue now in the works.

Eye Appeal is more than just a selling point—it's a vital ingredient for selling a magazine. No matter how splendid the content may be, the package has to be noticed, has to at-

tract attention. No science fiction magazine can live off its "steady" customers; there just aren't enough of them.

At times in the past, science fiction magazines have experimented with the "symbolic" or more dignified sort of cover. One issue containing a bright symbolic cover appeared early in 1928; another with a dignified design, symbolizing science fiction (or "scientific-tion") appeared in the summer of the same year. I doubt whether the Dignity faction was appeased by the first attempt, but the second was clearly its cup of tea. The fact that no further covers of this nature followed for several years suggests that the reaction was not encouraging.

More colorful (but not lurid) symbolic covers were tried again in 1932; these were representations of scientific phenomenon. In 1933, we saw a series of covers symbolizing science fiction; these were in subdued colors, but definitely had a fantastic and science fictional aspect. The 1932 series didn't look like much of anything at all; the 1933 series definitely said "science fiction".

Results: obviously disappointing—the oldstyle, imaginative color illustration was restored, despite the protests of the Dignity faction.

HOWEVER, the world changes, too. Science fiction is much more “respectable” *per se* now. And the Dignity faction’s argument has a little more weight, because now, in the Space Age, there might be a large potential audience which has been repelled by “lurid” covers which say to them “juvenile” or “cheap and trashy” science fiction.

Still, we have to have eye appeal.

The cover on this magazine is an attempt to compromise, to offer a more dignified style of cover, without sacrificing the eye appeal.

So we particularly want to hear from those of you who have never tried this magazine before, or who have come back after a long absence. DO YOU THINK WE’RE ON THE RIGHT TRACK WITH THE SORT OF COVER WE HAVE ON THIS ISSUE? DO YOU THINK THIS SORT OF COVER IS MORE REPRESENTATIVE OF SCIENCE FICTION THAN THE FLASHY, FULL COVER ILLUSTRATION?

SENTATIVE OF SCIENCE FICTION THAN THE FLASHY, FULL COVER ILLUSTRATION?

This is an experiment. We’ll have to try it for a few issues before we can be sure. If your letters and coupons agree with the general reaction, then we can be sure. (That may sound peculiar, but it has happened that a relative handful of customers were delighted with a cover, a story, or an entire issue—while the final returns showed nothing of the sort. However, a *notable increase* in mail, and a clear majority of opinion in favor of an experiment is usually a good sign.)

Naturally, we don’t want to hear only from those of you who are in favor—but unless science fiction readers have changed overnight, we shan’t have to worry. Science fictionists (both the reader and the “fan”) are noted for telling editors what they think about a magazine!

So drop us a line, won’t you? A letter, a postal card, or the readers’ preference coupon on pages 129/130—these are your ballots, and we pore over each and every one of them. RAWL

time bomb

by
Joseph Farrell

Under the psychophone, Randall couldn't lie, and he couldn't stop talking. But even so, there was still a chance that they might not learn enough, because...

HANK RANDALL slugged the big man with a big wrench. Then he stared in surprise at what had come of his sudden anger. He watched Brognor fall, a limp sack of fat, to the floor.

But the surprise passed swiftly. He looked around, saw that there were no witnesses to the act. The Syrtians seldom came around here; they kept their workers in line with the occasional psychophone tests and paid little attention to what mere humans were doing most of the time.

Brognor had asked for it. There had been no need for him to lead on the eight saboteurs, entice them into the Syrtian dome, and then report them. He could have ignored them, laughed at their fantastic plan as Randall had done. When the fat man came into the gold room and reported gleefully that the eight humans had been captured and killed, Randall saw red. If the wrench hadn't been in his hand at the time, he would have torn Brognor apart with his fingers.

Joan Correy was one of the eight—Brognor had named her

specifically. He and Randall had met her and the others on their last off-shift, and Brognor had it in for her because she was more interested in Randall. The conspirators somehow knew that they were gold men, working for the Syrtians, and tried to enlist their help in a plan to smash the force dome from which they believed the Syrtians were preparing to take over the Earth.

RANDALL hefted the wrench and reflected bitterly. He realized now that the conspirators had convinced him. He no longer thought of the two Syrtians as benevolent alien scientists.

Too bad he hadn't joined in the project. He'd probably be dead now—but as it was he was done for, when the Syrtians found Brognor's body.

It was a crazy scheme that Joan had outlined to him, smuggling in a critical mass of U-235 and the equipment for exploding it. Inside the hundred yard dome, that would vaporize everything, including Randall himself, if he couldn't get out in time.

But now he'd die a yewy

with nothing to show for it. He glared at the limp figure on the floor. Brognor needn't have crowed about it. There had been a sadistic satisfaction in the fat man's voice when he told about the trap he had set.

Randall resisted an urge to kick the twisted corpse. There was more important work to be done. If this was the end for him, he was going to take the two Syrtians along with him. Joan had wanted a fission bomb exploded here inside the dome.

She'd have her wish.

HE WAS IN the gold room, where he and Brognor had worked, and the big atom converter loomed over him. To the Syrtians it was just a gadget, but one that was of some use to them on Earth. A black cubic box ten feet in each dimension, it tore up dirt into elementary particles and rearranged them into any desired atom—in this case, gold. From its mouth a grayish yellow shower sifted steadily into a crucible. The shower was actually fine gold dust—atomically fine. He and Brognor would change the crucible

once in a while and melt the dust down into bars. The men who worked for the Syrtians were paid off in gold.

It was a matter of logistics. The Syrtians couldn't bring in enough power to overrun the Earth by brute force—yet. They were able to set up this force-dome to protect them while they studied the situation. And when they found that gold was considered a precious metal, and that men could be hired for gold, they promptly brought in the atom converter and started buying men.

That was easy, because many people didn't believe the Syrtians were too bad. Randall had been one—he'd thought the popular hatred of the aliens was baseless.

CLEANING out the atom converter occasionally was one of his jobs and he had studied the interior. The principle on which it worked was a mystery to him, but that didn't mean he couldn't manipulate it. People can adjust television sets without having the faintest idea of what makes the picture.

He turned off the power

and ripped off the cover, as he did when cleaning. He climbed into the interior and looked it over.

The Syrtians had instructed him carefully. He was to clean here and here and here—but never there. "*There*" was the part of the machine which evidently determined what element was created. It was set to produce gold, and if he tampered with the wheels, some other element would come out. The symbols engraved on the wheel meant nothing to him, but he could count. There were one hundred and four symbols there, and the marker was against number 79. Since gold was the 79th element, it was safe to assume that the one hundred and four symbols represented the numbers of the elements.

He counted up to symbol 94 and turned the wheel carefully until that number was against the marker. To be sure, he checked back from the end. Then he climbed out of the machine, replaced the cover and put an empty crucible under the mouth of the machine. He turned on the power.

A gray mist began falling

from the opening. The crucible started to fill with plutonium.

RANDALL did some figuring. What had Joan said about the critical mass of U-235? And would plutonium work the same?

He seemed to remember something about ten kilograms—since this accumulation wouldn't be spherical, say twelve. If plutonium worked the same. Since the bowl filled with thirty kilos of gold in about three hours, and since plutonium was somewhat heavier, this should build up to critical mass in about one hour.

His watch read 1100. At noon then, this dome should cease to exist. And there was a long chance that he might be able to get out before then.

He started out, just as a Syrtian came through the door toward him.

The Syrtian towered two feet over Randall and outweighed him three to one. His grayish humanoid body bulged with power, and he held Randall's shoulder gently while he looked at the body on the floor.

The gentle grip almost made Randall cry out. The stubby alien fingers remained steady as the Syrtian spoke.

"I suppose it does not matter why you killed your fellow creature. We can find out under the psychophone, but it is unimportant. It means only that today we lose two of our workers instead of one."

HE RELEASED the shoulder and waved Randall ahead of him down the corridor. Randall stumbled along, fingering his bruised bones and wondered if there was a chance to talk himself out of it. He had about fifty-eight minutes to get out of the dome, and he was developing a great desire to live. It wouldn't do Joan any good if he died with the Syrtians.

"What will you do with me?" he asked. "Brognor asked for it. It was self defense."

"You will be psychophoned and then most likely disposed of," the Syrtian told him. "Not on account of Brognor—his test showed a paranoic tendency and we weren't going to keep him long anyway, though he helped us by informing. We

are more interested in your relations with the humans who tried to bring a fission bomb into this dome. We were forced to kill seven of them, but captured one female. Under psychophone testing of her, we learned that this group had been in contact with you, and also that this female feels that you have a great affection for her."

Randall stumbled. Joan was alive, then! But not for long. If the Syrtians didn't dispose of them both, they'd die in fifty-six minutes in a blazing atomic blast. And the Syrtians would find out about the plutonium bomb when they psychophoned him, unless he could find a way to stall the test, and he wouldn't even have the satisfaction of knowing the aliens were going out at the same time.

The Syrtian pushed him along.

"If we find that you indeed have an affection for this female, as her thoughts indicate, we can no longer use you."

Randall stumbled again. Great affection? He realized something he hadn't even admitted to himself before. He

had been with her only a few hours and—it was true. He felt the irony—if he hadn't fallen in love with her, he could pass the test and be clear. But then he wouldn't have felt the urge to slug Brognor and to tamper with the atom converter, and wouldn't be in this mess at all.

He was halted by another crushing grip on his shoulder. The alien fingered a device on a door and pushed it open. He shoved Randall through and the door slammed behind him.

THE GIRL stared miserably at him. Her clothes were torn and her skin bruised. On the shoulder that showed through the ripped dress were welts showing where Syrtian fingers had clutched her. Her eyes filled quickly as she saw Randall.

"I didn't want to tell, Hank." She fell into his arms. "I didn't want to drag you into it. But that instrument they use—it makes you talk and talk and want to tell everything you know, even though you hate yourself while you're saying it. It makes you feel that your mind is naked..."

Randall stroked her dark hair, piled it on the bruised shoulder to hide the red marks.

"It's all right—you can't fight the psychophone. They'll be bringing one in for me, I expect." He looked at his watch. "Joan, if there's any way we can delay their using it on me—for about fifty three minutes..."

But his hopes of a delay faded. The door opened and two Syrtians came in, wheeling the psychophone. One of them motioned to Randall.

"Into the chair."

THERE WAS no point in resisting. Randall took the indicated seat and let the clamps be applied to his head. He gazed dully at the equipment. The wires from the clamps led to a glass bowl on the wheeled table in which a milky fluid began to churn. The Syrtians made some adjustments and suddenly Randall felt an urge to tell everything he knew. He started talking, unordered strands of thought in loose words, but one of the Syrtians directed him into the desired channel with a command.

"This female—tell me, do you feel affection for her?"

"Yes—I love Joan—although I only met her Tuesday night when Brognor and I were out on leave—I think she's the most wonderful..."

A sharp Syrtian voice: "And you wish to participate with her in the mating ceremonies of your people?"

"Yes—oh, yes—I do..."

Again the demanding voice forced his rambling speech onto the desired subject. "She was one of a group that attempted to smuggle a fission bomb into this dome. Were you a party to that act?"

"No, I didn't realize their plan was so far advanced. I thought it was just an idea they were working up for the future. When she mentioned the project to me, I advised her against it, told her it wouldn't work. It was Brognor who turned them in, had you activate the portals and take them as they came through. And when Brognor told me about it..."

ONE OF THE Syrtians reached to turn off the machine. The part of Randall's

mind that wasn't busy spilling its secrets felt a great surge of relief. Just in time! Another few seconds, and they'd know about the growing pile of plutonium. Randall felt content as he watched the Syrtian finger start to yank out the wire that would stop the psychophone.

His hopes were smashed when the other Syrtian waved the finger away from the wire. "Let him talk a little more—he just might have something interesting to say."

Randall chatted on, with no control over what he was saying.

"And after I slugged Brognor I decided you people would have to go. So I set up my own fission bomb, which will explode at approximately twelve o'clock..."

Syrtians never show emotion, but both of them bent forward swiftly. "Where—where is it?"

"You'll find it in the..."

Something flew before him. It was Joan diving into the psychophone, tearing the clamps from his head and knocking the wheeled table over. The glass bowl smashed

on the floor. The murky fluid oozed in a spreading circle.

Randall grinned happily, not minding his lacerated scalp where the clamps had been torn off. He no longer had any desire to talk, and he knew they had only the one psychophone. Logistics again—no space for unnecessary duplicates.

He reached to help the girl up.

"Thanks, Joan. You were wonderful."

ONE OF THE Syrtians didn't think so. He picked the girl up and tossed her into a corner. She groaned and tried to get up. Randall climbed out of his chair, pushed aside the Syrtian hand that reached for him. The two aliens surrounded him.

"You will tell us where the bomb is hidden."

"I will tell you nothing. In forty minutes you will no longer worry about the bomb, because you will be dead."

One Syrtian spoke to the other: "Can we repair it in time?"

The other looked at the wrecked psychophone.

"No." To Randall: "But we can torture you. You will tell us."

"Not in forty minutes." Randall pointed to Joan, sitting dazed in the corner wiping blood from her mouth. "Not after that. I'll withstand any torture for forty hours."

The Syrtians remained expressionless. "It's probably in the gold room," said one. "Where I found him. I'll find out easily enough. The crude fission bombs these people make are not easily hidden."

He left. The other alien let Randall walk over to Joan and put his arm around her. She smiled up at him.

"I don't know how you did it, Hank, but I hope he doesn't find it. Some of the others warned me against you, but I knew they were wrong. A lot of men work for the Syrtians without being bad. Many people have been fooled into believing they were here to help us..."

THE SYRTIAN returned. "Not there. No room for anything to be hidden in that room. The machine is running

normally— I didn't bother to turn it off."

"We could search with radiation detectors," said the other. "But it would take too long."

They spoke together softly, then turned to Randall.

"We are prepared to make you an offer. If you tell us where the bomb is hidden, we will permit you to go free."

Randall didn't feel too triumphant yet. The aliens were on a spot and had to make a deal; but it was a question of how good a deal he could get out of them.

"We'll go through a portal," he suggested. "Joan, myself and one of you. Then I'll tell you the location of the bomb and you can come back and dispose of it."

"It will be necessary for you to tell us first. Then, after we have checked that your information is true, you will be freed."

Randall looked pointedly at his watch. "Twenty-five minutes. And when I said twelve o'clock, I meant approximately. Give or take ten minutes."

The Syrtians conferred again. Then:

"This is our best offer—we shall permit the female to leave. Then after you tell us, you will be permitted to go."

That was the best Randall had hoped for. He agreed.

"A few minutes to say good-bye," he requested.

AT 11:45, Joan went through a portal created by the Syrtians. Those portals were one of the puzzling features of the force dome; they opened up to several miles away. She stepped through, and Randall knew she would come out the other side a good distance from the dome.

She had protested bitterly, wanted both to go or neither. But he was happy to have made that much of a deal. The Syrtians felt an enormous contempt for humans and they must hate him fervently for having forced the concession out of them. They'd hate him still more when they found out he was double crossing them.

He laughed. "I know very well that if I told you, you'd kill me. You've lost too much face already. So why should I talk?"

The iron grip seized his hair,

bent his head back. Pain streamed down his spine as the Syrtian bent him backward, twisting, twisting. "Where is it! Where is it!" The pressure relaxed a little to let him answer. He tried to spit, but his lips only slobbered.

"It's too late," said one Syrtian. "We must leave if we are to escape annihilation. Leave him here to die in his own explosion and come to the ship."

Randall felt the grip release and he hit the floor, new centers of pain flaring out where he landed. He choked for breath, heard a Syrtian voice dimly through the ringing in his ears.

"Ironical that such a clod should be the downfall of our plans. We must abandon all our equipment—it will be the end of the project on this planet for a long long time."

THEY LEFT. Randall found, after much struggling, that he could stand up. His back ached, but it would be all right in a few days.

A few days? But in a few minutes he'd be vaporized along with the Syrtian dome.

He tried the door, but it was locked tight, as he had expected. It worked electrically, he knew, but no human had ever figured the trick of opening them that the aliens found so simple.

The lights dimmed momentarily. That would be the Syrtian spaceship breaking out of a big portal. They wouldn't be back—at least not for a good many years. Supermen they might be, but next time they wouldn't be given time to set up a force to work from. He kicked the broken psycho-phone aside and sat painfully in the chair to rest his aching back. It was 11:55. At least Joan was out of it. He hoped the force field would hold long enough to absorb the worst of the blast so Joan and anybody else near the dome wouldn't be hurt.

He suddenly realized that this was he, Hank Randall, who was going to be vaporized in a few minutes. He couldn't think of himself in the third person. He closed his eyes and began remembering prayers he hadn't said in some time.

There was a dull, barely

audible noise and the lights suddenly went out.

The darkness was worse. He didn't want to die in the dark. He stumbled to the door and pushed at it, knowing it wouldn't open. Surprisingly, it did open. Of course—the power was off. He was in the corridor and there was light at one end.

He ran frantically, stumbling, toward the light, kept running when he was out of the dark corridor and in the daylight. After a while he stopped and looked back.

The force field of the Syrtians had ceased to exist.

MILITARY vehicles closed in, and some privileged civilians. Joan was in one of them. Men with scintillation counters scouted the area, finally established zones to be entered only by personnel of the proper expendability. Randall found Joan with a loose-faced man who permitted them only a brief greeting, then separated them.

"Now," said the loose-faced man, "suppose you tell me what happened. My name is Ivan Stafford."

"Dr. Stafford?" Randall stared respectfully at the renowned theoretical physicist. "Well, it was like this..."

He explained what he had done. "And now maybe you can tell me what happened? Evidently the bomb was just powerful to knock out their power system, destroying the force field. Why didn't it destroy everything?"

Stafford gazed thoughtfully at him.

"You can't make a fission bomb that way. The Syrtians knew you weren't lying, but they never thought that you might be mistaken! The plutonium you were producing was finely divided—atomically fine. An approach to critical mass would melt some of that powder into solid metal and blow the rest out as a powder. But the fact remains that you

did produce a small explosion. The only answer is that the powder must have piled unevenly and one or more piles toppled together in such a way that critical mass was achieved for a millionth of a millisecond. The resultant explosion was enough to knock out the power plant without causing extensive damage. If we can decontaminate the place, we may be able to pick up some of the Syrtian secrets."

Randall nodded, satisfied.

"That's your job, Doc. And if you find a way to communicate with the Syrtians, there's a piece of news they'll be interested in. One of their employees is going to be involved in a mating ceremony with a certain female..."

• ————— ★ —————

A Delightfully Different Story by

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don't miss the February 1959 issue of

FUTURE SCIENCE FICTION

the smoke of last rites

by GEORGE W. MAKI

The Terrans were determined to make an example of Klarin's son — even though no native could have committed this murder...

THE OLD-ONE muttered,
"Poor Klarin."

He stepped carefully on rubbery legs from the stone hut which was his palace; he was naked except for a loin-cloth. A single, long arm sprouted from his chest. He raised a gnarly hand to shade

his eyes from the hot reddish sun. The little village seemed deserted and lonely, for his people were keeping to their huts in fear and sorrow. He heard the awful pounding from over in the valley where the Terrans were camped.

Each blow was like a knife thrust into his heart. The Terrans were building a temporary stage. Tonight, immediately after sunfall, the Plovians would be forced to witness *Terran Justice*. A public execution to set an example the Terran leader, Mr. Oliver, had said.

"Poor Klarin," mumb'led the Old-One, blinking away moistness from eye slits. He was a stooped bean-pole on wobbly legs. His bald head shook as if it were too large and heavy for the rest of his body. Right now, his chameleon-like skin was a mixture of the reddish sun and the green sky.

The pounding continued, the sounds being carried by a breeze from that direction, blowing past the village toward the Black Forest. He wondered if it disturbed the

Bleezers stalking game or searching bark juices of the black trees. Perhaps not. The only thing that excited the animal—which resembled a tiger except for its twice-tiger-size—was a freshly-broken tree limb that exuded the bark juice.

It was about the only way it could get at the stuff. And it was a good thing, too, for even the scent was enough to drive the Bleezers half crazy.

HOWEVER, the Plovians knew how to cope with these creatures, something they couldn't do with those, the Terrans in the valley. There was no way of fighting weapons that hurled pellets capable of slicing a person in two.

Such wouldn't be used on Klarin, though. Too quick and undramatic to make enough impression on the Plovians. Mr. Oliver felt that the electronic-chair, which created a ball of fire and smoke, leaving no trace of its victim, would be most impressive. Something the Plovians wouldn't forget in a long time.

The Old-One dug out a long-stemmed pipe from the blue pouch hanging from his

neck. He placed the stem between discolored teeth, then took from the pouch a handful of dry leaves. Not as good as as the ceremonial tobacco, which was flavored, and certainly not as good as Terran tobacco. The latter was difficult to obtain.

He used a Terran stick match to light his pipe, then started off towards the shallow valley, puffing out clouds of smelly smoke, and coughing a few times at first. Some day, he hoped they'd be able to bargain with the Terrans and lay in an ample supply of their *good* tobacco. Or, better yet, maybe the Plovians could raise their own.

But this was no time to be thinking of tobacco when he had far more important things to consider. He had to think of what he was going to say and do in order to save his son from death...

HE STOOD at the rim of the valley, puffing on his pipe and gazing down at the Terran camp. A huge, plastic structure housing some fifty Terrans, scientists and explorers, according to Mr.

Oliver. But sometimes the Old-One had his doubts.

The pounding was quite loud here, and he could see the men hurrying about the platform they were building not far from the camp, nearer the slope which was dotted with blue-stones that were half as tall as the men.

Mr. Oliver would be down there directing the operations. The Old-One would go there then, in spite of the orders to stay away until summoned around sunfall.

He was about to start down when he heard the noise. It was a low growl that seemed to come from behind somewhere. The first thing he thought of was Bleezers. He turned around slowly, but saw nothing.

His eyes searched past blue-stones and thickets of striped spade leaves. He knew it would be almost impossible to spot a Bleezer in there because of the blending colors, orange being predominate.

The Old-One knocked out his pipe and put it away. He walked over to a large blue-stone and leaned against it. His slit eyes were still search-

ing. Finally he saw movement; immediately, he made his skin change color to stone blue. It was generally assumed that the far-sighted Bleezer would only see a fuzzy blend of colors. The assumption had been handed down from forefathers. It had never been questioned, since the chameleon device had never failed to trick the Bleezers.

THE HUGE Bleezer, looking almost pretty with its orange stripes, came into view. Its large head swung from side to side as it apparently searched for something to eat. Once it looked right at the Old-One as if the animal might be seeing him. The Plovian felt his spine tingle for an instant. Then he breathed a sigh of relief when he saw the Bleezer turn around and disappear into the thickets leading towards the Black Forest.

The Old-One started down the long slope then, his skin changing back to its original color. When he reached bottom, he headed straight for the platform. A fat man grabbed his arm tightly.

"Please, Mr. Oliver," the Old-One said. "You are hurting me..."

Mr. Oliver released his grip. "You were told to stay away until we came for you!"

"It is about my son..." There was sadness and pleading on the Old-One's face. "I have come to beg of you to reconsider..."

"Your son was judged guilty!"

"But he didn't kill the Terran, Sir."

"That your son was seen entering Crandal's quarters, is evidence enough."

THE OLD-ONE protested, "Klarin only came to beg tobacco for his pipe."

"That's just the point," Mr. Oliver said. "Poor Crandal's tobacco allotment was stolen by your son. We found it in his room."

"For that I am ashamed," said the Old-One, lowering his head. He wasn't exactly proud of the boy of fifteen summers, who had taken to Terran ways, craving their tobacco, speaking their language. Especially Terran slang and swear words. The boy was inclined to be

happy-go-lucky, to use one of their expressions. And not least of all, mischievous. Impish.

Still the boy was his own flesh and blood. He loved Klarin; Klarin must not die.

"When poor Crandal took after your son, he was ambushed and brutally slain. That makes your son a murderer," Mr. Oliver said. "Now we are going to make sure nothing like that ever happens again."

The Old-One thought for a long moment. "Mr. Oliver, has it ever occurred to you that we are equipped with only one arm? That to kill someone would be quite a task..."

"A surprise attack with a proper weapon would do the trick easily enough," the fat man said. "From the marks on Crandal's body, I would say the boy used one of your hooks that you gather fire logs with."

"But you didn't find such a weapon."

"Easy enough to get rid of." He glanced over his shoulder towards the platform. The pounding had stopped. It ap-

peared as though the workmen were through. He said, "Now, get back to the village and stay there till we come for you!"

"I want to see my son..."

"You'll see him later," Mr. Oliver snapped. "Now, git!"

The Old-One hesitated. "Would you grant me one wish, then?"

"Depends."

"Please get it over with while it is still daylight." He turned then, and trudged sadly away...

DRESSED in their blue loin-cloths and pouches of the same color dangling from their necks, the Plovians filed down into the valley. Two hundred grim-faced men followed the Old-One down past the blue-stones to where the fat man waited.

Mr. Oliver said to the Old-One: "You will arrange your people on the far slope opposite our men."

"We shall sit on the blue-stones," the Old-One said.

That was satisfactory to Mr. Oliver, and the Old-One directed his followers then. He watched as they filed past

slowly, each bowing reverently towards the Old-One, then seating himself on one of the stones. They clung to skin colors of the sun, which was slowly dipping towards the horizon and not visible down here, except for the reddish cast on everything. Before the march, the Old-One had given them certain instructions, which included bringing along their ceremonial pipes.

After they had seated themselves as if in a large amphitheatre, the Old-One spoke to Mr. Oliver.

"I beg of you to reconsider, Sir," he said pleadingly. "Klarin is my *only* son..."

"Nothing you can say now," said Mr. Oliver, "will change anything. The decree is final!"

"Please, Mr. Oliver..."

TWO HUSKY Terrans then moved in upon the fat man's orders, and escorted the Old-One to a vacant blue-stone. He sat down on its flat surface and glanced around at his people. They were talking quite noisily.

His gaze went down to the platform, swept past the entire Terran population standing

there on the other side. His eyes followed up the opposite slope towards the village and the Black Forest and the falling sun, seeing only the red-dishness.

Finally his eyes fell back on the platform. Three Terrans lugged an odd-looking, high-backed chair onto the center of the stage and departed. Mr. Oliver had told him about the electronic chair and what it would do. The Old-One shuddered at the thought.

A sudden silence came over everyone as two Terrans led Klarin up steps and over to the chair. His arm was lashed to his body. The boy was sobbing softly. Sight of him sent pain shooting through the Old-One.

The gangling boy cringed once as his bare leg brushed against metal of the chair. Then he was staring down at it and shaking visibly. Looking up, his eyes sought out the Old-One seated out there on the slope. When their eyes met, young Klarin tried to fake bravery.

A forced smile broke out on his lips, and a hint of impishness that didn't quite take.

His tongue flicked out and licked dry lips. He seemed to be fighting for self-control, his shoulders twisting and his feet shuffling awkwardly. He tried to speak but only cracked sounds came out.

The Old-One felt the terrible heaviness inside of him as he saw the boy's lips quiver and the smile faded away to be replaced by the old fear. He shifted uneasily on the blue-stone.

Mr. Oliver came on stage then, and made a short speech. He concluded with: "You may now have five minutes for prayer and meditation—then we shall proceed..."

THE OLD-ONE stared at the electronic chair. His son would be strapped to it and given sedation so that he wouldn't feel anything, Mr. Oliver had said.

Energy would flash through the air from elaborate equipment over in the camp. The receptor dish the Terrans were now putting in place on a rod projecting up from the back of the chair, would funnel horrible death-rays into Klarin.

He would glow reddish for

an instant, then burst into a dazzling ball of white fire. A puff of dark smoke would shoot skyward. There would be nothing left but a charred spot on the stage. The Old-One felt a shiver up his spine.

His eyes shifted to the villagers and met their questioning glances. He had briefed them on how they were to act. They were waiting now, ready...

He nodded and got off the blue-stone, then hurried to the stage. He climbed the steps to Klarin's side. No one tried to stop him, although sudden conversation broke out in the Terran section. Mr. Oliver had to quiet them, at the same time keeping a watchful eye on the Plovian.

There was silence except for the whispering breeze, which he quickly determined was still blowing towards the village. Towards the Black Forest. He noted, too, the beautiful red-dishness of the sky beyond, near the horizon, and he knew it was sun-fall.

AND EVERY Plovian knew that sun-fall meant feeding time in the Black Forest.

Several thousand hungry Bleezers roamed and tossed their noses into the winds to catch any scents drifting in. It wouldn't take much to send the whole lot of them on a wild and furious rampage. And any human they might see, wouldn't stand a chance, just as it must have happened in the case of Crandal.

A thin smile played on the Old-One's lips. He spoke to Klarin. "Everything is going to be all right, son..." He saw the boy's eye slits widen with a ray of hope, and the boy smiled and stood silent, watching his father.

The Old-One turned to the villagers and bowed. It was the signal for them to bring out their *Trukos*. The ceremonial pipes had extra large bowls that were already filled with flavored dry leaves. Flavored with an extra, strong dosage of bark juices from the black trees. The smoke would be dark and its aroma potent.

They changed skin color then, and lit their pipes while the Terrans watched in amusement and great ignorance.

So began the *smoke-of-last-rites*...

Third
of
Four
Parts

CADUCEUS WILD

by Ward Moore
& Robert Bradford

illustrated by FINLAY

The subcutes were bad enough: if Cyrus Tarn, Virginia Carling, and Hank were captured by them, the fugitives would be "cured". But there was something worse than the subcutes — there were the "Mercifuls", ever on the lookout for suffering people they could "help"!

Synopsis

DR. RAPHAEL TREE was neither a mad scientist nor a megalomaniac. "You don't allow children to play with live bombs, or neurotics to indulge delusions. We have seen what happened when they were so allowed. If we had taken over earlier, we would certainly have averted the third world war—and perhaps some of those that went before."

In this day, when the med-archy was supreme, such a statement almost sounded be-

lievable. CYRUS TARN could not deny that certain benefits had come from the rule of caduceus, where every citizen had to report to his doctor for a health check-up regularly, and where the doctors' decisions were the law. People weren't oppressed in the old-fashioned way; they had freedom of speech, of the press, of vote on political matters, and of worship—except where these infringed on public health. What constituted public health was, of course, determined by Ama.

TARN (alias Tennick) sat

This story began in the January 1959 issue. Copies of parts one and two may be had from the publisher at 35¢ each.



The helicopter was landing, but Cyrus would keep its occupants from getting out...

at the table with Dr. Tree and CHRIS MALLUP, who worked for Tree, drinking whiskey and wondered how much they knew or suspected about him and about his companions. Ten-year-old HENRY CARLING was being passed off as Tarn's grandson; the boy's sister, VICTORIA CARLING, was still supposed to be his sister—only her name was now CARRIE GOODSPEED.

"Man brings suffering on himself," stated Dr. Tree. "He insists on it, cherishes it, refuses to be parted from it. And the only thing he learns is that suffering never gets him anything but suffering. We've given the people the utopia so long dreamed-of: health, happiness, security, freedom from war. Some of them still aren't satisfied. The ones who would never be satisfied."

He was referring, of course, to the "mallies"—the "mal-adjusted", those who refused to adjust themselves to the sane and sanitary regimen of the medarchy. Cyrus, Victoria, and Henry were all members of that ubiquitous minority—which could do little more than rebel, and try to convince the majority that the rule of caduceus wild robbed man of all dignity. They believed that denying a man the right to make a

mistake, even a harmful one, made him less than a man.

Henry had just escaped from a medarchy raid on the mallie school with which he was connected. The boy had been kidnapped and brought to a hospital. Before he could be given treatment—drugs which would make it impossible for him to conceal anything he knew about the mallies—Cyrus had rescued him and, prepared with forged charts, set out for Mallups', where they would have refuge until a plane would take them out of the country. Victoria had gone on ahead, and was waiting for them. Their local "doctor", to whom they would refer, was ALEX CALLIGGS, a member of the underground. He was supposed to bring them new charts before they left Mallups', to go to their rendezvous with the escape plane.

If they were caught, it would be the end for all three of them. Not a firing squad, or any other sort of execution chamber, no overt torture. Just treatment—electrotranquilization and whatever else the medarchy's wisdom might prescribe for their mal-adjusted states. No marriage between Cyrus Tarn, age fifty, and Victoria Rald, age twenty-nine, slightly crip-

pled, could possibly be approved. They would be treated and—what happened to the flame when the candle was blown out? Urgency and emotion would be part of an unremembered past, blotted out, destroyed, non-existent. They'd never recognize each other afterward. For Henry, the process would be less drastic, but the result would be the same. And before it was over, the medarchy would know everything each one of them knew or suspected about the mallie underground.

Mallup was an eccentric, who put up a show of outward conformity, thumbed his nose at the medarchy in private, and did pretty much as he pleased—and got away with it. He had a private library of books prohibited by Ama, most of them quack literature; but he never tried to get anyone else to read them, he said, didn't sell them—and didn't agree with most of the stuff in them himself. He just liked to have them, that was all. It was a position, Cyrus thought, which made Chris Mallup ideal for a medarchy counter-mallie agent. And something was definitely wrong; there was a traitor—at least one—in the underground. First the school had been raided; then the promised new charts for

the three fugitives hadn't come through. Perhaps a change of decision, Dr. Calliggs suggested, when Cyrus telephoned him.

Yes, Alex Calliggs might be a traitor. Or Mallup. Dr. Tree might be learning important things through his protection and friendship with the old eccentric. And he mustn't forget JUDY LARCH, Mallup's sixteen-year-old granddaughter, fanatic in her support of the caduceans, unswerving in her faith in anything the doctors said. She was upset by the grandfather's flouting of health regulations, was certain that he ought to be in a home for the aged. There could be no doubt that if Judy suspected, she wouldn't hesitate a moment to turn Cyrus and the others in. She'd probably get in touch with the medarchy lieutenant at the station—who had given Cyrus and Henry cursory examinations, and looked over their charts. Traveling without a chart meant immediate and thorough examination in the nearest hospital.

Victoria had been upset over what had appeared to be Cyrus' undue attention to this ripe, pretty sixteen-year-old, and Tarn was worried. Such extreme jealousy on so little grounds was unlike

Victoria. She was waiting for him upstairs, now.

At length, Dr. Tree finished his whiskey sampling and said goodnight—not an evil man, which was the worst of it, Tarn thought. Few, if any, of them were malicious—they believed they were doing good, bringing health, happiness, and security to all. But one thing Tree had said stuck in Cyrus' mind. An ex-wife of the doctor's was personal physician to Horace Whitelands, editor of the all-important *Medical Journal*. DR. GRACE TAVISTOCK was an extremist, a member of the small faction in the medarchy which believed in immediate and thorough measures in dealing out the mallies. Whitelands must be warned before their suspicion that he was too liberal—favoring a moderate, gradual course against the maladjusted—exposed that fact that he was loosely connected with the underground, too.

Victoria was feeling better, though still upset. Then, in the night, something awoke Cyrus. Had someone entered the next room? Had Mallup come upstairs? He had thought that Mallup was listening in on them before. He awoke Victoria, who at once awoke the boy; all three began to dress quietly. The door opened, to reveal at

least three men behind the one in the doorway who was holding them in the glare of his flashlight. "There's no good in moving—we're prepared to use gas if we have to. Come with us."

"Are you orderlies?" Victoria asked as she shoved Cyrus toward the window. Tarn managed to take them by surprise, as they obviously did not realize that the three were fully awake, or would dare to resist. Victoria and Henry got safely out the window. Cyrus was not so lucky—the impact of landing was on his knee.

"Cyrus!"

He tried to get up, and almost collapsed. Knee—sprained or broken? He tried to be sure of the direction of her whispered voice. He had to know; separation now would be separation forever.

Yet...escape seemed futile. He was crippled, and Victoria lame; what chance had they against the ruthless efficiency of the subcuts? Cyrus thought that, after all, they should separate, and meet at the landing field—in fact, he could see no other course but to let himself be captured while Victoria and the boy escaped. But Victoria would not hear of separation; and it was fairly apparent that she knew what he had in

mind. "I'm pregnant", she told him.

That put a different light on everything; they had to stick together now. And the chase showed that the subcutes were not infallible; even with a searchlight, they did not spot the fugitives, who finally made their way to Dr. Calliggs' cabin.

Who was the informer? Who had put the subcutes on to the fact that three important mallies were at Mallups' place? Had Dr. Tree suspected? Was it old Chris himself, or his fanatically loyal granddaughter? Or—worse still—was there a traitor in the mallie underground?

Alex Calliggs himself was not entirely above suspicion—yet, what could be his motive? He had a definite grievance against the med-archy, and admitted that he was with the mallies because of it, rather than due to any particular sympathy with most of them. "I don't like it," Alex said fretfully. "I don't like being tied in with nuts or fanatics. Some chiropractor or religious maniac is likely to buckle and spill his guts."

"You don't usually find subversives among the calm and reasonable."

"Don't get huffy—I wasn't talking about ordinary neuro-

tics, or even psychoses. I can work with you and Vicky, but what about Raid and some of the others? How can I feel easy with my safety—my practice..."

Alex was nervous, and his binding of Cyrus' knee was tight and uncomfortable. He did, however, manage to find some sort of clothing for them, and food and water; and he took them in his car to the point where Cyrus decided to make for the woods and hike it. They hadn't told Alex exactly where the landing field was, and Calliggs' curiosity on this score didn't increase Cyrus' confidence in the younger man. Still...he had helped.

They followed a stream, discovered that men with rifles were on their trail, and came at last to a road, which rounded an unexpected curve where they saw a station wagon blocked by a fallen tree. It was too late to duck back: a woman got out swiftly, a rifle in her hands, and forced them to move the tree, then to get into the car and drive to her house.

"Do you always greet strangers like this?" asked Victoria.

"When I think they may be useful. Particularly if they happen to be three notorious mallies whose description

I've just heard on the radio."

The woman was Dr. Tavistock—whom Cyrus suddenly remembered as an ex-wife of Dr. Raphael Tree. Tree had said that "Grace" was in sympathy with the extreme faction in the medarchy—the faction which wanted to exterminate all mallies without any further nonsense, as quickly as they could be tracked down. Yet, Dr. Tavistock told the fugitives, she could help them—there was something she wanted done, and she would make a deal. She'd give them all new charts, let them go, and not report them to the subcutes.

All she wanted them to do was to kill someone.

It was while Cyrus was arguing, that a car drove up, and voices outside demanded entrance. Dr. Tavistock told Hank to get into a closet, then said to Victoria, "Get out two smocks, caps, masks. Put one set on. Now you," she turned to Cyrus. "If these are subcutes, I'll turn you over unless you do as I say. Take off your shirt and get on that table."

When the subcutes entered, Dr. Tavistock was apparently performing an operation; she refused to answer any questions, and ordered the intruders out. Finally, she let them see the chart of the "patient"

—they were suspicious at the fact that there was only one nurse in attendance, and that the "patient's" chest had not been shaved for a "cardiac operation". The leader of the squad looked at the chart, then said, "Oh... Now I understand the absence of additional witnesses. You have a terrible responsibility."

That seemed to satisfy the subcutes; they left, and Dr. Tavistock did a competent job of dressing Cyrus' knee, observing that the earlier bandaging had been somewhat inept. Finally, Cyrus asked who she wanted killed.

"Whitelands."

Horace Whitelands! Whitelands of the *Medical Journal*, and assistant to the head of the medarchy, Dudley Higginson.

"Well," Cyrus said, "at least you're not asking me to go after Higginson himself."

"No—that wouldn't be necessary. That subcute was anxious to know the name of the patient you impersonated. I terminated the Personal Physician on this operating table yesterday afternoon."

VII

REGICIDE, thought Cyrus—what more convincing evidence of maladjustment could you

have? Charles I and Louis XVI were the anointed of God; to chop off their heads was sacrilege as well as murder. The Personal Physician to the President of the Pan-American Union was the called of the Ama, whose choice had been duly ratified by the electorate at the polls when they voted for the presidential candidate who promised to appoint him.

Remembering Dr. Tree's conversation, he knew that the woman's "us" had not been used loosely any more than it had been a slip of the tongue. She could not have acted on impulse, even though she was the Personal Physician's doctor, and had established a pattern of getting him away secretly for his checkups. Obviously she was part of an organization—a powerful one. But not one with which mallies could co-operate; the ideological chasm was too great for opportunism to bridge. She was not engaged in revolution but in an attempted coup d'etat.

But, if the assassination of Higginson had been planned, why was that of his probable successor left to chance? And

where had the woman been going when they met her? The answers were important, but Cyrus Tarn couldn't fit them together. Not with a subcutane in the next room...

"He was my patient, suffering from a malignant growth on his lung. Had it become known, the Mercifuls would have made every effort to get him."

"So you anticipated them."

"I applied euthanasia, as I had an unquestioned right to do."

"Why not start a rumor that Whitelands has the same complaint? Or get him to call you in, too?"

HE TRIED to make his glance at Victoria an assurance that he was not going too far.

"It doesn't concern you, Tarn."

"All right. Get a Merciful for your little errand."

Whitelands in power. No one could be sure he'd be appointed, but precedent was in his favor: Horace Whitelands, Personal Physician—Horace Whitelands, who thought that the Ama ought to resign much

of its power, particularly over marriages and births; who secretly favored abolishing the subcutes. It was more than anyone could have hoped for.

"Will you stop beating around the bush? I want a yes or no."

"Yes—under certain conditions."

"You're in no position to bargain."

Cyrus walked around the table for the sheer luxury of putting his weight on a leg that no longer tormented him. "You want Whitelands disposed of. Either get someone else, or meet my conditions."

She looked at him curiously. "What do you want?"

IF WHITELANDS were to be Personal Physician, he could want nothing from her. That hadn't happened yet; it might not happen at all. In the meantime they had to get away; Whitelands' liberalism could not restore minds already tampered with. Cyrus had to convince the woman that his bargaining was sincere, that he was ready for an exchange of services. "I want appropriate documents and

paraphernalia of a retired physician."

"Doctors don't retire at your age."

"Think of something else then. Something foolproof, so we're not likely to be bothered by subcutes or MPs."

"You sound like a Patient—all doctors have divine powers. I'm flattered."

"You were the one with promises."

"And I'm also the one with threats. I've fooled around long enough—do as I say or your malformed little doll won't be around much longer." She turned on Victoria. "If you'd had that ankle cared for years ago, you wouldn't be a cripple now."

Victoria's face flushed, then paled. "A doctor set it. He wasn't a very good doctor. When we took off the cast a month later, it was like this."

Grace Tavistock's normally high color turned a dark red. "No doctor would do that—it's like Tarn's lie about a doctor binding his knee. 'Not a very good doctor'! I suppose he wouldn't hop into bed with you."

"I was fifteen," explained Victoria coldly.

The woman stared at her. "How fascinating. An ex-lover, then—some drunken mallie posing as a doctor."

"My sister doesn't tell lies." Hank said. "She won't let me, either."

"Quiet. Hank. According to medical ethics, all doctors are paragons." Cyrus turned to the woman. "Incidentāly, if I say I'll kill Whitelands, how do you know I will? Or can?"

"It's a six or seven hour drive to the city. You'll drive there as soon as we get rid of the subcutes."

"How do you expect to do that?"

"I have some influence. When we settle things between us, a phone call will pull the watchdogs off. You'll drive my stationwagon. The cripple and her brother will stay with me. If I don't hear of Whitelands' death within three days, they'll follow Higginson. I'll also see the subcutes get help in catching you."

"Gee," murmured Hank, "you talk rough, lady."

IT MIGHT be safe to give in now. "Mmmm. Yes. I'd say

that guards your interests. All right. Put your call through."

"I'll have to give the technical gentlemen outside something to quiet them first. Coffee, perhaps—with soporific qualities. By the time they come to, their radio—I assume they have one—will be recalling them."

"You're efficient, aren't you?" commented Victoria, without admiration.

"Quite efficient, Miss... aah... Miss. Much more than you are. Because you—all mallies—do things primarily for yourselves. What I do is for humanity—what happens to me is incidental. You might try that approach sometime. Now..." she suddenly reverted to her earlier suavity "...if you'll excuse me, I'll see about the coffee for our problem idiots."

She went to the door, unlocked it. It was thrown violently open. The subcute held the gun ready as he came through.

"You're efficient, Doctor, but we're not quite idiots. Line up there, all of..."

She lunged at his shins, reaching upward at the same

time to grab the revolver.
"Get him, Tarn!"

CYRUS hesitated only long enough to despair of his inability to sacrifice the possibility of escape to principle. He used his right fist like a mallet (*I must be not only unscientific but wide open, not to mention ridiculous*, he thought) and smashed it against the jaw. With his left he hit the man in the temple. Neither blow was hard enough to bring him down, but they evidently startled him sufficiently to allow the woman to wrench the gun away. She struck him expertly with the butt; Cyrus saw the impact of the metal on yielding flesh. The man fell sideways.

"Shut the door," she ordered Victoria. "Watch him, Tarn. If he comes to, slug him again." She crossed to a cabinet and brought out a hypodermic syringe. Then she bent down to the prostrate subcute and pulled up his sleeve.

"Hey, you forgot to put anything in that," exclaimed Hank.

"What are you doing?" cried Victoria

Dr. Tavistock did not answer as she found the artery and raised it between thumb and finger. Cyrus took an irrisolute step forward, hand outstretched. "Wait! You can't..."

She pushed the needle in, pressed the plunger down. He halted; she was undoubtedly giving him a strong sedative, something to hold him while she telephoned.

She put her finger on the subcute's wrist. There was a long, trickling wait, then the chest heaved convulsively, the body shuddered twice and collapsed into stillness. Dr. Tavistock rose. "He won't bother us again."

CYRUS stared down. His horror was not directed at the woman but at himself; by giving in to her demand for help he had become an accessory to murder.

She said briskly, "Needless to say, our plans must be changed."

"Needless to say." One didn't look back. "I think you can modify your own, somewhat. You wouldn't like me to tell his superiors just what

happened, before they begin treating me."

"That doesn't worry me. You're an opportunist, Tarn, but you don't think fast enough to be a successful one. I've already decided we'll all have to go to the city together."

Victoria, still shaken, demanded, "We? What makes you think we'll go with you?"

"You killed him," muttered Hank awedly. "He's dead."

"And that's why you'll come with me."

Victoria caught her lip between her teeth. "She's right, Cyrus. Whatever our ultimate relations with her, our interests are the same for the moment. Now, Doctor—were you going to leave that body on the floor?"

Cyrus considered it likely; the woman seemed to do everything by impulse rather than calculation. Something like this might have happened with Higginson. She might not have intended to kill him at this particular time, but had yielded to the opportunity. Overconfidence? Like the plotters against Hitler in 1944.

Never draw conspirators from the ruling classes, he

thought. Fear hasn't sharpened their wits to the proper edge. No one he knew—except possibly Alex—would have failed to take proper precautions against that subcute's leaves-dropping. Wouldn't have had to kill him either, and embarrass themselves with his corpse—to say nothing of being put in a bad position both morally and practically.

"What about your changing clothes with him?"

HE SHOOK his head. "There were three of them. The other two must be close by..."

"One of them followed this one into the room before. You didn't know, because he said nothing."

"So even if I slipped into the car without their noticing—an unlikely supposition—they'd eventually come in here and discover that the body was their companion's, not mine. I don't suppose your equipment here includes a handy little private crematorium?"

"No. And Higginson's in the only refrigerator drawer."

He thought a moment. "There's only one thing to do,

then, and it's risky. I hope you won't make it more risky by being trigger-happy again."

Her eyes flashed. "You seem to forget who's in command of the situation here."

"If you're in command," said Victoria, "go ahead and run things."

Again she was pointedly ignored. "What do you suggest?"

"Is there another way to your station wagon except through the front door? Yes? Good. Or at least, fair. The three of us will sneak around and get in unobserved, if we can. Meanwhile, you call the other subcutes and tell them that this one has died of a heart attack—I suppose an autopsy will confirm it?"

She nodded.

"Tell them that you're going for help. Then you can drive out, apparently alone."

"If you haven't made off with the car first."

"You have the keys, haven't you?"

VICTORIA spoke decisively. "It won't do, Cyrus. They'll have spotted the phone wires. Why should she go for

help instead of telephoning? Calling them in is all right, only it must be to tell them he caught sight of us heading through the trees and wants them to follow."

"You forget the dogs. They'll soon show there's no trail to run down."

"Not dogs," corrected the doctor—"electronic spoor-counters."

Of course. They would have something like that to enable them to follow as quickly and accurately as they had. But how did it happen that neither Alex nor Yester had heard of the device?

Victoria bent over the dead subcute, unzipped his leather jacket. From the large inside pocket she drew out the familiar pliofilm envelope. "His name was William Horton Hartney."

"Euphonious," remarked Dr. Tavistock, condescending to notice her.

Victoria paid no attention. "Does your knee feel well enough to run a mile—perhaps two?"

Cyrus winced; the idea was not attractive. "Yes."

"I think it's the only way.

Swing around through the woods down to the road. As soon as you have a good start she can tell them that Hartney is after you and wants them to follow right away. The counter will pick up your trail. Then we'll put Hartney in the station wagon and meet you. That will save her from anything worse than suspicion, and get us out of here."

"It sounds possible. Are you willing, Doctor?"

"They may come back and find the other body."

"Suppose they do? You weren't going to hide it permanently, were you?"

"I wanted his death concealed while Whitelands was alive. With both of them out of the way, the Ama will be beheaded, and doctors with some sense of medical ethics can take over."

"Take it or leave it," said Victoria. "Of course you could pick up the rifle and shoot us all, but that won't help your position."

DR. TAVISTOCK seemed undecided for a moment, her earlier assurance gone. Finally, she bent her head.

"Come along."

She moved over to the corner and retrieved the rifle. Resting it over her arm, she went into the living room, then beckoned. Cyrus tried to convey some reassurance to Victoria, but it was she who said to him, "It will be all right—I know it will."

In the big room, Dr. Tavistock peered out of the window. "There they are. They don't seem to be very active."

"They probably figure that Hartney has the situation in hand. Waiting for orders. All the better—they'll be ripe for your message." It was best to encourage her; she looked as though she might go to pieces now.

Dr. Tavistock led the way through another door into an L-shaped kitchen, as warmly lit and homey as the surgery had been bleak and efficient. "The old road winds, but you'll find it easier than scrabbling through the trees. It meets the new road where we turned around. Wait there."

"All right. How do I find it?"

"That way." She pointed. "When you hit it, turn left."

RUN, Victoria had said, but he didn't trust the new well being of his knee that far. The trees had been cleared only to keep the kitchen in sunlight; toward the front of the house, they crept closer. He made for their shelter, expecting the sound of pursuit or a bullet; when none came as they screened him, he looked back. No sign. He walked rapidly.

Had he done right to leave Victoria and Hank with the woman? Was there some way Dr. Tavistock could find to accuse them of Hartney's death and turn them over to the other subcutes? Or would she purposely delay long enough to let them capture him? Then whom would she get to kill Whitelands? Still, he couldn't rely on logic. She had tried to procure assassination on the spur of the moment; she might abandon it as impulsively.

He came upon the old road, in even worse shape here than it was down below. He would have to watch every step, lest he put his foot in a sump-hole, or trip in one of the miniature gullies. Run, Victoria had said, but already his leg was tired.

Suppose they got there ahead of him? Would they dare wait? They would have to. But suppose the subcutes had refused to believe...? Or suppose only one obeyed, while the other stayed to keep his eye on the house? Suppose they were unable to get the body into the station wagon? Suppose...

A mile or two. It made a difference: a mile—or two. He could walk a mile in fifteen, twenty minutes. What time was it—noon? One? Now that his leg no longer agonized, Cyrus Tarn was able to realize how helplessly tired he was. Sleep...

THE SUBCUTES would have no reason to play cat-and-mouse with him. The three fugitives would be small game compared to Grace Tavistock if the subcutes discovered that she'd killed one of their number. Or Higginson.

Kill, kill, Kill or be killed; justify. Hank had been shocked, Victoria dismayed, himself only startled and made slightly unhappy. And how long would it take Hank to become injured? How long be-

fore he himself began carrying a gun for self-defence? And then using it, since offence is the best defence? What was the moral difference between a mallie and a medarch?

Behead the Ama. Thunder on the left; violence from the right. Only Whitelands might save the situation. If he could. The question was, *could he?* Could one man, no matter how highly placed, do anything against a crystalized system? The Tavistock women and her fellows must believe that. Their beliefs changed nothing; the situation was not subjective; it existed independently of anyone's conclusions about it.

One trouble with peoples' thinking was a confusion about the nature of the medarchy. It governed, but it was not government. The 86 States of the Pan-American Union were still sovereign. Legislators still enacted laws; policemen arrested, courts tried, jailers executed sentences. Only now there was something above the law, above the government, and aside from it. Laws were laws, but medical regulations were paramount. Laws were

laws, but the lawbreaker was no longer a criminal, able to hold some remnant of pride, to pay a debt to society by serving a sentence. Now he was just another maladjusted individual, protected by no legal presumption of innocence, but having testimony wrenched from him by a medical examiner whose opinion carried the ultimate weight with judges and juries, even in the face of old-fashioned evidence.

Cyrus stopped, suddenly alert, and listened. Nothing. Or was it the faint sound of a motor? Or something else? No, nothing. He was limping again, though the fierce pain had not returned. A mile? Not two, certainly. "Perhaps a helicopter," he muttered. "Perfect conditions." It was time. Also, a copter would have no trouble spotting the airfield.

HE HAD forgotten, of course. The subcutes already knew where the field was. The subcutes... But the subcutes could be defeated, even if only momentarily. By killing them. A price higher than he cared to pay, though he had paid it. But what of

Victoria's child? Plead her belly...

A rabbit bounded from the undergrowth, legs whisking him over the road in panicky backward sweeps. Instead of crossing and finding refuge the nearest way, it followed the man-made track, as though helplessly compelled. If the subcutes had dogs, instead of the counter, they might have become excited at the scent of game and delayed the pursuit. He finally began to run.

He was panting, and his leg was hurting again when he came to the junction of the two roads. Surely the station wagon should be there, waiting. He tried to calculate how much time had passed since he left the house. Half an hour? Allow ten minutes to convince the subcutes; fifteen to get the body into the wagon, less than five to drive down. Something must have gone wrong.

In spite of his knee, he paced anxiously up and down. He visualized a dozen different forms of calamity. What an incompetent fool he had been to leave them! And what could he do now, with the sub-

cutes a mere ten minutes behind him, at most?

THE WOMAN was driving. Victoria sat in the rear seat on the opposite side, looking grim; Hank, beside her, looked shaken. Cyrus opened the door and slid in next to Dr. Tavi-stock, after glancing back to assure himself that Hartney's body was where it should be—on the floor behind the seats. Victoria held the rifle on her lap.

"She was going to leave us behind," Victoria explained, "after we got the body in. She might have, if she hadn't forgotten the gun. She left it lying on the ground. Hank picked it up and threatened to shoot her tires."

"I would have, too, only I wasn't sure I ought to. I couldn't let her beat it without us, but what good would the wagon be with holes in the tires?"

"You did fine," Cyrus commended him abstractedly, wondering just why the woman had tried to desert them. He could not see that she had anything to gain; did she think that he would be more willing to kill

Whitelands with Victoria and the boy in the hands of the subcutes? Or perhaps she had meant to leave him behind also, to abandon her plan of beheading the Ama in panic to save her own skin. Yet this didn't fit in with what he had observed. Her impulsiveness was reckless, overbold; not fearful.

"More hallucinations. Delusions of persecution," she sneered.

"Does it matter?" he asked. "Our business now is to put as much distance as we can between ourselves and the subcutes, and dispose of the body."

"And then, I suppose, use the rifle on me." There was anger, but no alarm in her voice.

"You're the one with a habit of murder, not us. We have no intention of applying any of the current euphemisms to you—neither thanatize, euthanize, nor dispose of. Perhaps you won't believe it..."

"Let her disbelieve it then," Victoria interrupted harshly. "I assure you, if she tries any more tricks I won't hesitate to use the gun."

DR. TAVISTOCK laughed. "You mallies can't even adjust to yourselves, can you?"

"No," answered Cyrus. "And you may have trouble understanding that we don't particularly want to. An individual is an individual, not a piece of a jigsaw puzzle. 'A peece of the maine' certainly, but what two pieces of the main are adjusted to each other? They live in perpetual change while retaining their essential differences."

"Change is another word for adjustment."

"No it isn't. Society may change man, but man changes society. Someday we shall end the power of the Ama—not by beheading it, or assassinating its members, but simply by refusing to conform to its dictates. That's why we don't shoot you."

"Except in self-defense," amended Victoria.

The never-failing plea. "Shouldn't we be close to the Coast Highway by now?"

"Just around the next bend."

"We'll have to watch it. It's possible that the subcutes radioed for help."

Would it be smart to have everyone lie down, leaving only the driver visible? Then those looking for a car with four people... No, if they were really looking, such a simple stratagem would be unlikely to work; they would be at a further disadvantage for nothing. What speed was the station wagon capable of making? Nothing spectacular, he judged. They would have to depend on luck again, a dependence which worried him increasingly. Trusting to luck was the best way to end up un- luckily.

THE HIGHWAY at this point ran along a cliff edge; the ocean was flat far below. The sun was high. "Say, I'm hungry," complained Hank.

"It was thoughtful of Dr. Tavistock to provide lunch for us," said Victoria. "If I hadn't suggested it, we wouldn't have gone back for the food and gun and might have been left behind after all. The bag is next to the subcute, Hank. Reach it and we'll eat. Can I pass you a chicken wing, Doctor?"

Cyrus was puzzled; this needling was not like Victoria. Her resentment of the attempted desertion was understandable, but there was nothing to be gained by harping on it. Or was this symptomatic of her condition, like the outburst of baseless jealousy yesterday?

"This is good," mumbled Hank, through a full mouth. "I never knew doctors could cook."

You did adjust, despite lofty proclamations of nonconformity. Disdaining violence, you took advantage of its use, or threatened it yourself. You tried to save a child from the horrors of the medarchy; and in the process, you taught him to watch a man being killed in cold blood and enjoy a refreshing meal inches from his stiffening body. Since it was impossible to withdraw entirely from the world, every gesture of participation condemned you that much deeper to its patterns.

There was little traffic, and they sped along. The highway dipped, climbed again. How many miles...? No, he'd have to find it by the landmarks. With luck... That word again.

The greatest luck in the world couldn't make the trip to the airfield any less desperate.

THE ROAD turned inland, through a great grove of redwoods. How close to the field did they dare go in the station wagon? Too far left them exposed to curious observation; too near gave the women a dangerous clue to where the airfield was. If that made any difference...

The highway became unexpectedly straight; they could see windswept miles ahead to a lump of land plumped into the sea, with a lighthouse topping it. "That's a police-car coming toward us," Victoria mentioned casually.

"Sheriff's car," corrected Hank. "Man, oh man."

"It's all right." Cyrus spoke with more confidence than he felt. "Just repeat the multiplication table. And Doctor..."

"Six times six is thirty-six," Victoria complied.

"Six times seven... Say, what *is* six times seven, Vicky? It's gone right out of my head."

"Yes?"

"...if you should suddenly get a notion to hail the police..."

"Forty-two. Six times eight..."

"Why should I?"

"I'd point out where your puncture entered. That would dispose of a heart-failure story."

"Blackmail is low, Tarn."

"Whereas kidnapping and murder are highly honorable," snapped Victoria. "Six times nine is fifty-four..."

The deputies' car passed without slowing, the jaws of its two occupants moving gently, their glance perfunctory. "Nothing to it," Hank boasted.

"Maybe, but you'd better brush up on your sixes," admonished his sister.

CYRUS concentrated his attention on the hills and arroyos, sloughed seaward by the mountains and cut or bridged by the highway. Each had its distinct characteristics, yet there was a familiar similarity about them. If one lived here, or walked along the road, the differences would stand out; in a speeding car, it was

hard to distinguish one from the other. It wasn't easy to correlate a map and a description—neither recently studied—with the actual, physical objects. If he had not been expecting someone to take them to the field, or if he were not so weary... That cut, over there? No; it was too high, too steep, too short...

What if his mind was too beset with fears, his memory too blurred with tiredness to recognize that particular succession of bridge, cut, ravine, cut... Wait? "You can slow down now," he said casually.

"What for?"

"We're leaving you here."

"But... Now, look here..."

He reached over and shut off the ignition, removing the key. "Sorry. This is as far as we want to go."

She brought the car to a halt on the shoulder of the highway. "Don't be a fool. You're sure to be picked up right away. If you come with me to the city, I'll see that all of you are well-hidden—and as soon as you put Whitelands out of the way, I'll get you charts, money... a safe way to leave the country, if you like."

HE OPENED the door. "Come on, Victoria. Don't let loose of that gun, but if a car comes along point the muzzle down, as though you were just getting out to bag a deer."

"Out of season," objected Hank.

"I'll get you those papers you want—for a retired physician."

"Thank you, Doctor. Some other time, perhaps."

"You fool, I see what's in your mind. You think you can escape by sea—there's an old fisherman's landing somewhere around here..."

"That's ridiculous," he exclaimed, trying to make it seem as though she had uncovered the secret.

Her triumphant look vanished. *Thinks we'll shoot her after all, to keep her mouth shut.* He closed the car door and turned away. "So long. Thanks for the ride and the chicken."

"But you can't leave me with the body. You promised to help dispose of it."

"I don't think so. I seem to recall saying we would take it along and that it would have to be gotten rid of. You can do a

better job than we. Goodbye, Doctor."

"Damn you," she said.

He waved his hand. "You and Hank start down toward the ocean," he directed in a low voice. They obeyed. He began walking along the highway back toward the south. The car door opened; he heard her shoes on the loose gravel of the shoulder.

"Are you going off with my keys?"

"Oh, I'm sorry." The keys were still in his hand. He offered them to her.

SHE MADE no move to take them. "You're making a stupid mistake. I can protect you, get you anything you want."

"I want freedom."

"You pompous ass!"

He nodded. "I've noticed the tendency myself. Afraid it's become a habit. Here are your keys."

"Freedom for what? Your mallie friends are so busy scurrying away from authority and knowledge that they can't stop for freedom to do, to be. You needn't tie yourself to a crew of paranoids, weigh yourself

down with a cripple who'll be a shrew and a hypochondriac before she's thirty. You have capabilities for something besides silly plots in dingy flats. You could be somebody of importance, someone..."

"Power is the last thing in the world I'm interested in, Doctor. I just want to live as I please, think as I like..."

"That's a child's dream!"

Between them, they could spin the argument out for hours. He turned and strode down the road, conscious that the rest had again driven the pain from his knee.

"Come back!"

He waved, and turned off the highway on the side opposite that taken by Victoria, hoping this would confuse her. The bank was overgrown with wild blackberries; the thorns raked his skin as he pushed through, and finally blocked his way entirely. Both dignity and caution forbade his peering back to see if she were still standing there; he waited, face turned away, feeling extraordinarily foolish.

At last he heard the starter's faint whirr; it sounded as though she were stamping

furiously on it; and the brief grinding of tires on the shoulder. He came back slowly; the highway was empty.

THE WAY down to the beach was one he could not have negotiated earlier. Loose stones gave way under his feet; solid footholds crumbled; firmly anchored plants tore free when he grabbed them to steady himself. Whatever megalomania possessed the surgeon, Grace Tavistock was unquestionably a better hand with a sprain than Alex Calliggs had been.

The sand stretched impassively between two shoulders of spongy rock which plunged into the ocean. The rollers breaking so regularly on the beach were ferocious beyond the rocks, slamming themselves against the wall, spewing spray up and over them, sucking and hissing. Hank was capering up and down, dragging a long chain of stranded kelp behind him. Victoria was leaning, broodingly, on the rifle.

"Did you take a touching farewell of the lady?" she asked.

"Oh quite," he said lightly.

"She offered me half her kingdom, but I wasn't in the market for subdivisions."

"That's nice. I suppose she told you how foolish you were to tie yourself to a cripple."

He repressed his start and smoothed her hair. "Let me offer you half *my* kingdom," he said. "Or I'll take half yours, if it has a swimming pool, or even a bathtub in it."

"Well, she..."

"Hush. If I'm right, we're less than three miles from the airfield. The question is, ought we to go there now and try to find out if the subcutes have discovered it—as I'm reasonably sure they have—or wait till it's near plane time?"

She did not speak immediately, frowning. Finally she threw off the sullen look. "We could tell more in the daytime, couldn't we? I mean, at night they'd be hidden, and we wouldn't know anything till they pounced on the plane."

HE CONSIDERED. "I don't know. By going there in daylight we're exposing ourselves to the chance of being accidentally seen."

"We'll have to be careful."

"And the basic reason for going there has changed. It's no longer to escape—though we certainly will if we can. We have to warn the plane off if the subcutes are laying for it. That either means two trips, or staying there till night. Both additional risks."

Was it caution or simply tiredness speaking? She was right; they would have to go to the field right away. "Victoria, please listen to me: there's only one sensible thing to do. You and Hank stay here while I go ahead and find out."

"We've been through that argument before. We'll go with you." Her expression softened. "Don't you understand, Cyrus? I don't want to be safe when you're not."

"But...you..." He suddenly felt awkward about mentioning it.

"But that's just when a woman can't bear to be parted. Perhaps after the child is born I could sacrifice you to it. But not now."

"And Hank?"

"Hank will have to take his chances. It may not be fair—it isn't. But I'm a ruthless fe-

male and you're stuck with me."

He kissed her. "Hey," said Hank, who came up behind them, "no smooching on company time."

They walked along the hard-packed sand, then on the dry, soft beach above the highwater mark. A gully clove the pali-sade, its sides humped and warted, evidently a runoff for floodwaters in the rainy season. It had once breached what was now the highway; a large concrete culvert, high enough for them to walk through erect on the debris paving its floor, confined seasonal depredations.

THEY WERE not the first wayfarers to pause here; the curving walls were scrawled with legends at various heights and in varying hands. "J M & J/4.7.55" "30 days vag Stay away from baugh" "See Winnie in Seaside. Ten bucks. Worth it." "Heres a spesamin for you doc."

Beyond the culvert, the gully lost itself quickly in bare outcroppings and young oaks. The going was, in some ways, the roughest they had yet ex-

perienced. Whenever they struggled free of the brush, they were faced with the sheer face of exposed rocks, not unscalably high, but high enough to make climbing laborious.

"Golly, there must be a better way up than this."

"Maybe, Hank. But I think this is the least conspicuous."

"From the ground, sure. What about the air?"

Involuntarily Cyrus Tarn looked up. The sky was blue and bland and cloudless. "Not a thing," he said cheerfully, in spite of his leg.

"You're looking. I'm listening."

"I don't hear anything. Do you, Victoria?"

"No. . . . Wait. I don't know."

"Aw, just open your ears," urged Hank scornfully.

They stood still. Faintly—or was it an illusion?—he heard the syncopated beat of an unmuffled motor. Some car on the highway?

"There she is!" Hank pointed triumphantly.

Far to the east, so close to the hilltops that it seemed to be gliding down them rather

than flying over them, was a helicopter.

VIII

CYRUS muttered, "It doesn't make sense."

"Why doesn't it? You've been expecting them to bring in copters all along."

"We're not so important as the plane. If the copter is out to spot us, they're giving away the fact that they know where the airfield is."

"There's no one but us to warn the plane. If they can get us first, they'll be that much more certain of getting it."

Give up, thought Cyrus. The plane is doomed—there's nothing to be gained by this futile attempt. "We'll have to try," he said. "We'll just have to avoid being seen."

Standing motionless, they watched the copter slide through the air toward them, its vanes revolving so slowly that it seemed impossible they could keep the awkward body in the air. It veered northward, hovering almost out of sight, then drifted idly, till it was

almost overhead. "Don't move, at all."

The copter circled, flew seaward and back, hovered again above the treetops; then, as though finally satisfied, it quickened its pace and left.

"I wonder how long it'll be before there's another one along. Or two, or three."

They climbed another rock-face and found themselves on the grassy plateau again. Only here, instead of sloping, it was almost level; the hillocks and hollows were at a minimum. He guessed that farther along it was perfectly flat, made so either by nature or design, the one spot for miles suitable for a landing strip.

KEEPING close to the cover of the trees and bushes, their eyes constantly roving the sky for the returning copter, they moved steadily northward, detouring where the irregular boundaries of the grassland yielded to the encroaching shrubs. Gloomily, Cyrus calculated that they were at least doubling the length they had to travel; doubling or tripling. With his knee acting up again this was,

to put it mildly, inconvenient.

They must have been so intent on scanning the sky that they paid less than the mandatory attention to things lower down and closer at hand. So it happened that just as Cyrus was saying, "This must be the field," Hank, who had grown impatient of their slow progress and run ahead, inadvertently emerged into the open. They heard a woman's voice exclaim pleasantly, "Why, hello my dear. What brings you out here?"

He squinted through the brush. Hank was standing a few feet ahead of him, confusion and indecision apparent in the set of his shoulders and the nervous scuffling of his foot. Beyond him were three obvious picnickers: a woman, sweetfaced and whitehaired, plaidskirted, sitting on her ankles; a girl no older than Victoria; and a man with wide shoulders, heavy muscles bulging his thin shirt, standing, whose face showed traces of resemblance to the woman on the ground.

"Lost, son?" asked the man pleasantly.

"What difference does it make?" inquired the girl.

"Why, Edith, what a thing to say," exclaimed the woman. "If the child is lost, he's suffering. And if he's suffering we must help him."

"I'm not lost," said Hank. "Goodbye. Got to go now."

HE STARTED back; the big man followed with a swift, easy stride. "Careful, son. You could easy..."

Then he was face-to-face with them; their startled looks reflected. "Uh," said Cyrus.

The man recovered quickly. "You folks must be with the boy. Come on over—we're just about to have a bite to eat." He took hold of Hank's arm. The boy tried to pull away, but it was clearly impossible.

"No thanks," said Victoria. "We can't stop. We must be on our way."

The man made no move to relinquish Hank. The woman rose to her feet; both she and the girl came closer. "Been hunting?" The man motioned toward the rifle. "It's closed season, you know."

"Besides, dear," said the woman, "don't you think it's

cruel to kill animals? They're fellow-creatures, after all."

Cyrus felt some of his tension go. These were clearly no subcuties or Medical Police. "Just brought the gun along against mountain lions," he explained. "They've been seen around here."

"Oh, but they're fellow-creatures too," expostulated the woman, backing away a little.

The man reached for the rifle with an easy sweep and took it from Victoria's startled grasp. "No use making Mother unhappy," he explained with a disarming smile.

"But... Give that back to me!"

HE SHOOK his head. "No animal would come within a hundred yards of so many humans. You won't need it." He still had his grip on Hank; as he followed his mother and the girl, the boy was involuntarily pulled along.

"Wait a minute," began Cyrus.

The woman paid no heed. "I've never been able to understand what makes men go hunting or fishing. It isn't as

if we had to take life in order to live. Why, the land is teeming with food. Even weeds are good and nourishing, you know."

It was impossible to see anything sinister in her cosy chatter; the snatching of the fire-arm was neither attack nor affront, merely an awkward assertion of its uselessness. "Yes Ma'am," agreed Cyrus. "That's very interesting. But we have to be getting along."

"Hurry, hurry," said the man, shaking his head. "Everybody's in a hurry. What does it get you?"

"Let go of me," said Hank.

"Yes, please let my brother go and let me have our gun."

CYRUS MOVED forward. He could not hope to best the big man in any test of strength, but he was sure it would not come to that: there was no animus visible. He could not mean to hold the boy against his will.

"Why," exclaimed the mother, "the poor man is limping. You must be in pain."

"Not much," said Cyrus. "Just a little sprain, and it was

bound up only a few hours ago."

"Compromise," muttered the man, shaking his head. "Bandaging and poulticing, medicating and doping. Cutting off and grafting on. Compromise, compromise."

"How right you are, Edward. Just like your poor, dear father."

"What you need is strength," said the man. "A couple of these sandwiches of Mother's, and you'll feel like new."

"Do you really think so, dear?" asked his mother. "Oh, I do hope so. Of course they're very nutritious. Pure, stone-ground wholewheat bread, filled with raw peanut butter and soybean jelly, fortified with molasses, powdered milk and brewersyeast. We never eat animal food."

"Mother Jones, you know that people—most people—don't..."

"Aw, Edith," protested the man, "don't argue with Mother."

"It's all right, Edward. I know that Edith is not really humane at heart yet. I only hope she'll grow into it from

seeing your example. Oh, I fervently hope so."

"We have friends who are vegetarians," remarked Cyrus. "I'm sure the sandwiches are delicious. It's just that we haven't time."

"I'm going to build a fire," announced Edward. "We'll have some coffee. We're not food faddists—we don't eat animal food, to avoid causing pain." Still holding Hank, he gathered up a handful of fallen twigs. Edith, looking sulky, brought him an armful of branches. Not unskillfully, he started the fire.

CYRUS LOOKED apprehensively at the thin blue smoke. The copter—but then, the copter could not help spotting the whole group. But subcutes on foot would see or smell the smoke. If the man would let go of Hank, he would willingly resign the rifle.

"We understand," explained Victoria. "We're not refusing your sandwiches because we don't think they'll taste good. But we must hurry. . ."

"You are limping too, dear," cried the mother. "How awful!"

"It isn't awful at all. I mean, I hardly limp at all, except when I'm very tired. And even then it doesn't hurt."

The glances of Cyrus and Victoria met. These people were clearly nuts of some kind; to cross them would make new, unnecessary enemies. Nor could they do anything while Hank was captive, despite the danger of the fire advertising their presence. Victoria sank easily to the ground. At the same moment, Edward released Hank's arm. "That's better. Do have a sandwich."

They all took one and Edward put the coffee pot on the fire. Cyrus bit dubiously into the bread, found to his surprise that it was quite palatable. He noticed that Edith made a face over hers, put it down half-eaten. He also saw that the action didn't escape the attention of Edward's mother.

"I do hate waiting," she said plaintively. "I think putting things off is simply terrible."

"Oh, don't be a fanatic," urged Edith. "We'll all feel better after a cup of coffee."

"I don't think you ought to talk to Mother that way, Edee."

"Edward, I don't mind, really I don't. I know she doesn't understand. But I'm so worried about these people..."

"About *us*?" asked Victoria.

"Yes, dear. You may belittle that limp, but I noticed it. Let me see it." Deftly she took hold of Victoria's foot, gently prodded the slightly enlarged ankle. "Just as I thought—it's been broken and didn't heal well."

"That was a long time ago. It hasn't bothered me for years."

EDWARD SUDDENLY became articulate. "How do you know? How can you judge what emotional and psychological pain it has caused you? How can you measure the constant hurt of knowing yourself inferior to everyone around you, or the growing warp of being unable to walk or run naturally? To be unlike is to have an open wound—you may grow accustomed to it but it still bleeds, still saps your vitality. I understand how you think you've recovered: the surface pain is gone. The brain has defensive powers which keep us from seeing our own

problems objectively. But remember yourself as you were before—don't you admit there's a difference?"

"Of course there's a difference. I learned to appreciate life, to love it better because of what I suffered, physically and psychologically, from this ankle. I've not been made inferior by it or warped. It taught me a lot and I think it made me stronger, more capable, better."

"You don't understand. I'm sorry to say, Patients never seem to."

"I have a hunch these aren't Patients," said Edith. "Where are their charts?"

"That's a point," agreed Edward, pouring out the coffee into enamelware cups and handing them politely around. "Where are your charts?"

Cyrus Tarn rose. "This has been a most interesting conversation. I'm sorry we can't continue it. We're going now."

Almost lazily Edward took a pistol from his pocket. "Sit down, Mister," he ordered softly.

"Why are you tormenting us?" asked Victoria.

EDWARD'S mother looked shocked. "He wouldn't torment anything, not anything. When he was just a little boy he used to hide the flyspray. You don't understand. Our lives are dedicated to helping people. To eliminating all suffering."

"Vicky!" exclaimed Hank. "These people are..."

"Yes, dear? Are what?"

"What difference does it make what people are called?" asked Edward.

"None, son. You're quite right. Now that we've had our coffee, let's not postpone things any longer. It isn't kind."

"What kindness do you propose to do us at gun's point?" inquired Cyrus.

"About you we have no doubt, poor man. You must be helped."

"...Mercifuls," said Hank. The word fell heavily.

"Ah," said Edward regretfully. "Names. Tags. Labels."

"Do you deny it?" asked Victoria.

"They're mallies," said Edith. "They cling to pain."

"A living dog is better than a dead lion," quoted Cyrus desperately.

"A cynical remark, made by a cynic," said the woman.

EDWARD sighed. "They don't understand. They have no idea what it means to devote your life to eliminating pain. We discipline ourselves. We don't drink: it might cloud our judgement. We don't smoke: it might dull our senses. We don't dance or go to entertainments: there is no place in our lives for frivolity. We are vegetarians, we mortify the flesh, we risk our lives constantly to help others. And what is our reward? Misunderstanding, hatred, slander. We're hunted by subcuties and orderlies—we're subjected to shock treatments, lobotomies or psychotherapy if we're caught."

"It hardly seems worth the effort," murmured Cyrus.

"Oh, but it is, you poor man," said the woman. "All self-sacrifice is. That's why we'll risk our lives to help you."

"Why bother with us?" asked Victoria. "We aren't worthy."

"Don't belittle yourselves," said Edith.

"Don't be flippant," Edward admonished sternly. "Not a sparrow falls..."

"I really don't know how you can think of marrying her, Edward," his mother complained. "I've told you and told you. She's not dedicated. She's playing—the way such people have always played. They used to become fascists or communists. Now they pretend to be humanitarians, to get a—a *thrill* out of an act of mercy or two. Then one day they have a headache and meekly revert to being Patients. You can't trust her, Edward dear."

"What a sweeping diagnosis," sneered Edith. "One would think from listening that you yourself understood something besides kill, kill, kill."

HANK SUDDENLY broke down. "Don't kill us. We haven't done anything. Please don't kill us."

"They won't," Victoria proclaimed fiercely, taking him in her arms. "Don't worry, Hank."

"We wouldn't hurt you for anything," the woman assured him earnestly. "Our whole lives

are spent saving people from pain."

"It says here," gibed Edith.

"Knock it off, will you?" urged Edward.

"We'll be glad to arbitrate your differences if we live long enough," suggested Cyrus.

Edward smiled agreeably. "It's a problem, you know. Edith and I are thinking of getting married. Mother is afraid she'll be so miserable she'll have to be helped out."

"You're all I have left, dear," his mother said sadly.

"Your own fault," snapped Edith. "Being merciful to your own husband."

Edward looked shocked. "Edith! You know there was every reason."

"'Reason', 'mercy'," cried Victoria. "You sound like an old-time judge or executioner. How can you call murder anything but murder?"

"Murder," said Edward contemptuously. "After all the care and risks we take, you call mercy murder. In the old days, right after the war we used to shoot those in pain because the doctors refused to put them out of their misery, kept them

alive—sometimes for years—just to demonstrate their own scientific skill. Then euthanasia was legalized, and no matter what they say, it was partly because we had shown the humane way.”

EDWARD'S face took a cast of dedication. “At the same time we gave up shooting—except where there was no choice, as there would be if you tried to get away right now—because it wasn't always really instantaneous. We took to using finely honed razors across the juglar, but this often caused undue anxiety, if only for an instant. We tried different hypodermics—I suppose you know what happens to anyone but a physician or nurse caught with a hypodermic needle—at great risk to ourselves. We finally settled on a mixture of curare and resperine. It's a glorious way to end all suffering. You literally relax out of life, feeling neither pain nor apprehension. Yet...do we get any appreciation for all the trouble we go to, for all the chances we take, the need to cover our actions or disguise our instruments?”

Without shifting the pistol from his right hand, he took a small black tube—some sort of pen, to the cursory glance—from his pocket with his left.

“But we don't want your mercy,” remonstrated Cyrus.

“Neither did her husband,” commented Edith. “That didn't stop her.”

“That's a lie,” said the woman calmly. “He begged for mercy.”

“I don't know how you can talk that way to Mother. You know her life has been devoted.”

“When I was a girl,” said the woman, “we had race horses. My family hadn't learned to give up worldly things. Our special favorite was a black stallion named Meteorite. One day he broke his leg. He was heavily insured. The insurance company paid off, but demanded Meteorite—alive. They splinted the poor, suffering beast's leg, and made their money back in stud fees. If you could have seen that wonderful animal who had been so happy; so spirited, now hobbling wretchedly around, kept alive only for mercenary purposes, I'm sure your heart

would have melted. Just as mine did."

"Sure. That's no reason to kill people," objected Hank.

SHE WENT on, as though there had been no interruption. "Then my mother developed cancer. This was before pressure by Mercifuls—believe me, Patients and doctors who hate us so, owe us a good deal—made euthanasia legal. Mother lived for three years; and the last six months the strongest narcotics failed to deaden her pain. She screamed steadily for the last week of her life. I decided then if I ever had a chance to shorten a living creature's misery I'd do it."

"How dared you take such power to yourself?" demanded Victoria.

"I'm a humble instrument," she replied simply.

"But your own husband," marveled Victoria. "How could you?"

"What'd he have?" inquired Hank, suddenly recovering. "A splinter?"

The woman's face was nobly sad. "No, my boy. Neither a splinter nor anything else to joke about. He was taken by

subcutis, soon after helping one of them—the poor fellow had been shot by a mallie, and was in terrible agony—and he was subjected to treatment. When they got through with him, he was completely changed. Not himself any longer.

"I'd never been suspected of any non-conformity—people with my background are invariably Patients—so he was returned to my custody as a Post. I remembered him as he had been: so aware, so deeply concerned with everything that went on, so ready to dare anything for the right. Now he sat all day, staring at his hands, or if I asked him to do something he went at it mechanically, unquestioningly, unthinkingly, until I told him to stop. He who was always ready to defy any power, no matter how great, was now docile and obedient. He wasn't even a caricature of himself any longer—just a familiar body without a suggestion of the old spirit. It was mercy, certainly, to help him slip away. I knew what he wanted, and I did it."

"But..." Vicky stopped, shaking her head.

CYRUS SAID, "Don't you see you're really not doing anything to oppose the Ama this way? You're accepting their action and then palliating it, instead of removing the cause."

"We're removing pain," insisted Edward.

"Believe me," Cyrus said, "I'm what I've always been and I don't want to be helped to slip away."

"Nor m-me," stammered Hank. "My sis-sister neither."

Edward addressed himself to Cyrus. "There's no doubt about you. You need help. I don't know about the others."

"There's nothing wrong with the boy," said Edith. "He may be obnoxious, but I don't suppose it hurts him. Besides, what will become of him if both the others are helped?"

"We must steel ourselves to be kind to him also." The woman's eyes had a withdrawn, hazy look. "Think how unhappy he'd be in an orphanage. They can call them Integrating Homes all they want, but they're still orphan asylums."

"You're a monster," cried Victoria.

"I'm not sure you're right,

Mother." Edward pinched his lower lip doubtfully. "I'd agree about the girl if it weren't for the boy, and I can't see helping him. And if we don't take compassion on him I don't know that we can be merciful to her."

"There can be no exceptions, Edward. It's our duty. If we begin making fine distinctions, saying we'll act only when misery reaches a particular point, or when pain is this sharp or unhappiness that bad, we are shirking our duty. We have no choice—we must give mercy to all three of these poor creatures."

"You can count me out," declared Edith. "There's a limit."

MOTHER Jones turned to her son. "You see, Edward dear? Remember what I've told you? She's unwilling to act. She sets her own whims above the inescapable humane necessity. It's too easy an evasion—these half-hearted people are always ready to make it."

"I'm not a fanatic," said Edith obstinately. "Neither is Edward, down underneath."

"Don't set yourself up

against Mother, Edee. She's much wiser than we are."

Cyrus looked longingly at the rifle, firmly edged under Edward's massive rump. Force? Violence? He would not have hesitated a split second.

"Thank you, my son." She turned earnestly to Victoria. "Surely you can see it's the only right thing to do. For the child's sake."

"You're a monster," Victoria repeated.

The woman shook her head. "If I were helpless or suffering I'd bless the one with courage to help me."

Cyrus stood up. As soon as Edward made a move, he would throw himself at him; this time. Hank and Victoria would have to obey his injunction to escape. The old woman couldn't stop them—he was reasonably sure the wavering Edith would make no more than a half-hearted try. Meanwhile...

"It's only fair to warn you," he said, making his voice as firm as he could, "that there are subcutes close behind us."

"We're not Patients," said Edith. "They won't bother us."

"We're not, either. They

want us, and they're going to be very interested in anyone who interferes with their getting us. Alive or dead."

EDWARD looked from Cyrus to Mother Jones. "I wish we'd never run into you three. Putting us in a difficult position like this."

"He's bluffing," said the mother unhappily. "Unfortunately people cling to their misery at all costs. If subcutes are really following you, they would have seen the smoke of the fire and been here by now."

"They will be, any moment," affirmed Victoria. "You must have heard on the radio of the hunt being made for Cyrus Tarn and the two other mallies he helped escape."

"So you're Tarn," said Edith, looking at him with new interest. "How many subcutes have you killed?"

"It doesn't matter. Edward!"

Edward shook his head, but at the same time fumbled with the pencil-like weapon. "Mother..."

"Duty is duty. Hurry!"

Cyrus was almost in his spring, calculating to hit Ed-

ward's shoulders with his own, knock him backward, pin him to the ground. He took a full breath. Then he heard the rising sound of a motor.

"He wasn't bluffing after all," said Edith.

"It may not be anything. There's still time. Hurry, Edward."

"Let's get out of here," cried Edith. "I want no part of this."

"We have a duty. We've got to help these poor souls."

"If the subcutes take you, you'll never be able to help anyone again. Remember what they did to your husband," Victoria urged. "Balance us three against hundreds in the future."

"She's trying to fool us Edward. Quickly!"

"They'll catch us," screamed Edith. "They'll catch us and hurt us. It doesn't make any difference to you—your life's practically over anyway. But Edward and I could be happy. Please, Edward." She began to cry.

"Mother, it's a long way to the car. We'll be cut off. We won't have a chance."

THE MOTOR—it could not be anything but a copter—was closer. Much closer.

"Are you going to think only of self? It isn't like you to be so callus, Edward."

"But I'm not sure about the boy. And why should I risk everything for Tarn?"

"Give it to me. I'll do it myself!"

"Mother, wait." He rose, holding the weapon above his head. His mother reached for it, pulling futilely at his arm. He stumbled, caught his balance, but in doing so kicked the fire, scattering the blazing embers over the dried grass. It caught, with a quick, widening crackle. Cyrus lunged for the rifle, clasped it gratefully in his hands.

The fire spread rapidly in an almost perfect circle. "Let's get out," shrieked Edith. "We'll be cut off."

Cyrus pointed the rifle at the woman. "Yes, I think you'd better go."

She looked shocked. "Surely you wouldn't shoot me?"

"I'm pretty sure I would if I have to."

"But that would be murder."

"Yes."

"But I'm not in pain. You have no reason..."

"Edward, let her stay if she wants to and get killed. I'm going." She began walking rapidly away.

Edward hesitated only a few seconds. "Mother, she's right this time. Please come."

"Edward..."

"No, Mother. I'm going. And you can't help them without me. Come on." Not too resolutely he followed Edith.

The woman looked compassionately at Cyrus. "It's such a terrible mistake," she muttered. "It's not right to leave you suffering like this." She followed her son, calling brokenly, "Oh, Edward, come back and do your duty."

THE FIRE in the grass had reached the bordering brush. A gnarled bush expanded in blazing flame topped with black sooty smoke. Hank said, "Are they really gone? Aren't they going to kill us?"

"Oh Hank, darling, darling! Oh no: they've gone, thank God." She held him close. Cyrus, still clutching the rifle, put his arm around both.

The fire, erratic, had left clumps of untouched brush behind. Beyond them its progress was marked by a widening ring of smoke. Her trembling gradually quieted. "The subcuties!"

"If they're really close behind us, they're stopped by the fire. We're safe till they get it out."

"Are we?" asked Hank. "What about the copter? It's come back."

So it had, the sound of its motor obscured by the noise of the fire. Now it hovered ominously almost overhead. They were completely exposed, completely vulnerable.

IX

VICTORIA asked, "Is— is there any chance it's just here to spot the fire?"

Cyrus Tarn shook his head. "Too quick. I'm afraid there's no way out."

The machine circled, came lower. "Let's run!" urged Hank.

"Run into the fire? Better to wait, I think. Maybe if there aren't too many of them..." H gestured with the rifle.

"Cyrus! You wouldn't!"

"I don't know. I was certainly ready—I think—to kill those Mercifuls."

"They were going to murder Hank."

"The subcutes will murder his mind. Besides, we were all ready enough to take advantage of the Tavistock woman's bit of murder. I even helped her."

"That was different. Acting on the spur of the moment. This would be in cold blood."

"You yourself were talking about self-defense a few hours ago."

The copter made a last circle and came daintily to rest within yards. The door opened.

"Get behind me," Cyrus commanded. He would order them back in. If they refused... He wasn't sure.

No one came out of the opened door. Instead, a face appeared, a familiar face. "Hiya, folks? Want a ride?"

"Dr. Yester!"

Cyrus Tarn gripped the rifle hard. "Stuart, get your subcutes and your copter out of here if you want to go on living."

"Don't be a jackass. Climb up in and let's get going."

"No thanks. *You* get going."

"Listen: the cutes are all waiting outside the fire, ready to pounce. You can't get away from them. I've been coming here ever since I got word they jumped you in Secarros."

CYRUS' FACE hardened. "They jumped us because you told them where we were. Now you've come to finish the job. Don't get out. I'll shoot. Believe me."

"Vicky." Yester's freckled face tightened into unaccustomedly sober lines as he appealed to the girl. "*You* must know I didn't give you away. Why should I? Even if you don't believe me, let's get out now and argue later."

"Come out, you and your subcutes, and leave the plane to be taken quietly when it lands."

"It won't land. It's been warned off. And I have no subcutes here. Only Dr. Calliggs."

"Alex!" exclaimed Victoria. "What's he doing with you?"

"Acting a little morose at the moment—he's been quite cramped in here. I didn't think

either of us should get out after looking the field over earlier. Security and all that, you know."

"I meant, why is he with you?"

"Oh. Big meeting. You're expected—come as you are. Didn't want him to miss it, of course, so I picked him up. Satisfied?"

Cyrus pondered. The meeting might be invention. Still, he had the gun, and the position here was hopeless; it could hardly be worse elsewhere. "Move back from the controls. I'm coming in to make sure the cabin isn't full of cutes."

"You'd be punctured by now if it was." But Yester's face obediently vanished. Cyrus climbed up awkwardly, finger on trigger, only too conscious that the rifle pointed skyward, waiting to be seized and disarmed. He was sure that he was not acting with any great intelligence.

THE SMALL cabin was dim. Alex rasped, "I want to go on record that this is all against my judgement, having all of us in one spot, particularly in something so vulnerable as a

copter. If Dr. Yester were deliberately offering a tempting package to the subcutes he couldn't have done better."

So Alex's suspicions of Yester hadn't been lulled. "Ok, Alex." Apparently there was no one else in the cabin, but Cyrus had to make sure. Someone might be pointing a revolver at Alex. "Got a flashlight?"

"Here," offered Yester.

"Turn it on the cabin. Down low. In the corners."

"There you are. Satisfied?"

"No." He motioned Victoria and Hank to climb in. "We'll come with you, but I've still got the rifle."

"Thanks for the warning. Nothing like friendly gratitude, I always say."

"We'll be grateful when we know why and to whom."

"It's a deal," said Yester cheerfully. "All right, here we go. You may find it somewhat rocky—this is only my fourth time running one of these things. Alex could do a better job, but I wanted the fun."

"Boy! Doctor Yester, would you let me try?"

"No, Henry," said Cyrus. "Even if he would, I wouldn't."

"Aw, I never get to do *any*-thing."

THE COPTER lifted, tilted, righted itself, rose higher. The perimeter of the fire became visible, burning raggedly, already smoldering out in patches where the vegetation was sparse. On one fairly wide front, however, it was still vigorous enough to be impassable to the two subcutes who stood there, staring upward. The copter had not yet gained so much altitude that their faces had lost definition. There was the faintest of resemblances between them: wide jaws, large necks, thin mouths.

One hali-drew a revolver; the other laid a restraining hand on his arm. Why didn't they shoot? Because they didn't know he was in the copter? Or because they did, assured he was safely captive?

Stuart Yester grinned over his shoulder. "No use letting them know our course. Give them a little puzzle to work on." The copter flew south-east, staggering each time it rose to clear a tier of hills or veer between them.

"Radar!"

Yester nodded. "It's a chance. The only alternative would be flying low over the water. We'd avoid radar, but we'd be as highly visible as a fly on a bald head."

The answer fitted innocence. (*If not Yester, who?*) It fitted equally the theory they were being flown into the arms of the medarchy. Only... "It seems hardly worth it," Cyrus said aloud.

"What?"

"All this trouble and expense for three unimportant mallies."

"Mallies are increasingly important. After all, the Healthfare State has outgrown its experimental stage." Yester changed course.

"Where are you going?" There was alarm in Victoria's voice.

DR. YESTER looked at her. "Think I ought to mention it? Somebody gave away our using Galentry as a hideout. What a nice bit of information the location of this meeting would be."

"Do you think Cyrus or I—or perhaps Hank—brought the

subcutes to Secarros?"

"Odder things have happened, my queen-empress. Si could be an agent provocateur, you might have sold out, and Hank-size children have been worked on before."

"Pat but unconvincing," said Victoria. "Please stop swinging this machine around. I don't want to be airsick."

"Do my amateur's best," he promised.

"What about the medarchy's experimental stage?"

"Well, sociology isn't my science, nor political economy. If they were, I'd hesitate to generalize anyway. So I won't say that there are two times when a set-up like the Healthfare State puts an extra premium on conformity, with all the accompanying emphasis on informers and secret police: when it's getting established, and when it feels it's in danger of falling apart."

"If the medarchy's in danger of falling apart," broke in Alex, animated for the first time, "then I'm a Buddhist-vegetarian-antivivisectionist mystic screwball like the other psychos who are against it."

"But you *are* against it?"

Alex looked scornful. "As I explained to Vicky and Cyrus, the Ama hit me in the pocket-book. That's reason in any language. Reason enough to work with a bunch of eighteen carat psychos, if they represent the only opposition. And a pretty poor one, if you ask me. By the way, Doctor, I'm not sure I ever understood exactly what *you* have against the Ama."

YESTER pondered for a moment. "Not too sure myself, Doctor. Nothing nice and neat like economic determinism. The Ama never did me out of a nickel as far back as I can remember. Just say I have too much respect for the medical profession to feel it ought to have any authority beyond what it earns in the exercise of its good offices. I suppose if we had a literate state—a republic of letters—there would be writers who objected to forcing everyone to read their novels, or carry around test papers to prove they understood the meaning of their short stories, or suffer frequent examinations by official literary critics to determine whether

they knew what happened on June Sixteenth, 1904."

"Doctor, you're an idealist. The trouble with idealists is that they sometimes change their ideals—yesterday's fetish becomes tomorrow's abomination. For my part, give me the man whose actions are motivated by self-interest. He's more reliable—or at least more predictable."

"We're over the top of the mountain," exclaimed Hank. "I can see everything for miles and miles. Man, I'd like to have one of these things for my own!"

"Selfish interests change too, Doctor. The sufferer whose sole interest today is the removal of a malignant growth, may find tomorrow that there's nothing more important than bilking the surgeon who took it out."

Alex turned away from the conversation. "How's the knee?"

"You bound it too tightly. A lady who thinks euthanasia is the only sovereign remedy did a more comfortable job. Perhaps you know her—a Dr. Tavistock?"

ALEX NODDED. "I know her by sight. Grace Tavistock. Thoracic surgery. Your knee would probably have been more comfortable by that time with no bandage at all. The one I put on was right for the condition it was in."

"Wasn't that the hen who used to be married to old Rafe Tree?" asked Yester. "The nurses' delight,' they used to call him twenty-five years ago. Evidently he didn't delight her, or else they disagreed on a diagnosis. I heard she nicked him for a big hunk of property west of Secarros. What's this about her enthusiasm for the happy despatch?"

Cyrus gave them an edited account of their experience, relating fully her attitude toward the Ama and her hints of a group with similar ideas.

Alex, who had evidently been brooding over the slight to his skill with sprains, showed excitement. "Why, it's a natural! These people really mean business—they're not just a bunch of conversationalists. If we were working with them, we might get some results."

"It depends on what results you want," said Victoria. "If

it's a matter of killing, we might just as well enlist Mercifuls. Like the three who were going to put us out of our misery just before you came."

"Mercifuls operating around here? They're getting bolder and bolder. The Ama isn't what it used to be."

"It never was," said Alex bitterly. "The medarchy can't do anything about a bunch of assassins. They're too busy poking their noses into things that don't concern them."

HANK SAID, "They were really going to kill us too. They were much creepier than the lady doctor. She talked tough, but they pretended to be real nice."

"You see?" contended Yester. "More Mercifuls every day. Medical royalists like this Tavistock suddenly busy as a jar full of diphtheria culture. Even mallies whisk around the country in copters these days."

"Yes" said Victoria. "Only the Patients are happy and harmless."

The copter dipped lower until it was barely clearing the tops of liveoaks. They skimmed over several fields. "Going to

put her down," Yester announced. "Sorry if I shake you up a little."

Cyrus started, realized he had been dozing. For how long? He gripped the rifle. "Remember," he warned, "I'll shoot if I have to."

The copter circled, bumped, twisted, bumped again, stopped. "Made it. All right, pile out—we've got to put this thing under cover before it's spotted. Si. if you must have that cannon ready to defend your honor, I wish you'd turn it over to Vicky. We need all hands to get this windmill moved."

"You'll have to work a little harder or take longer, then. Someone tipped off the subcutes before. This time I'm prepared."

"Someone did. I think we'll find out who in the next few hours. Very well—come on, the rest of you."

Cyrus was the last to get down. They were at one end of a large pasture. At the other end, a group of horses crowded against the fence in shock. Close by the copter was a huge barn partly remodeled into a hangar; a piper cub

stood nonchalantly before it. Beyond the pasture was a brown ranchhouse; two men were walking from it.

SUBCUTES? There was something familiar about them even at this distance. A trick of the failing light. Cyrus Tarn watched their progress while still keeping track of the others pushing the copter into the hangar. Led by Yester, they moved the piper cub back to mask it. Was all this elaborate pretense? He swung the rifle to cover the approaching men. The tall one, his overlong white hair ruffling slightly in the breeze, the creases of age cross-hatched over a weather-toughened skin was—yes, certainly—John Rald. And the other looked like Hammerfield.

"Cyrus! That's John over there. John, oh John!"

Tarn lowered the rifle. Rald was more than unimpeachable—Cyrus would as soon have suspected himself. And he had worked with Eugene Hammerfield often enough to believe him absolutely trustworthy.

"Silas Tennick, what are you doing with that weapon of destruction? Vicky, darling, tell him to put that thing away before I smash him with it. Hank, old man how are you? And you, Stu—Alex?" He picked Victoria up by her elbows, easily, and kissed her. "Silas, what's this about being roused out in the middle of the night by subcutes?"

"They came in shooting, but Vicky and Si were too fast for them. I had to run in my bare feet. Si hurt his knee. But we got away."

HAMMERFIELD, tubby and soft-cheeked, took off his spectacles and put them back on. "Concise reporting. If you're going to fill in the details, I suggest you save it. Everyone else will want to know what happened and there's no use going over it twice."

"Who's everyone?" Cyrus demanded, suspicious again.

"All the delegated nuts from Northern California," John Rald informed him cheerfully. "Two good sisters from the Ursuline Convent. Two osteo-

paths, a chiropractor—at least he was there the last time I looked—and a fine assortment of poor misguided heretics, not to mention a young man who has discovered a loophole in the second law of thermodynamics, and a young woman who is convinced that her future lies in bed. Any bed.”

“Business as usual,” agreed Cyrus.

“It certainly is,” said Alex. “And I can think of nothing more pointless than to be dragged away from a few day’s rest and toted around in a copter like a ferris wheel, in order not to miss a precious moment of three or four hour’s bleat and blatt.”

The other three came up: Mendenall, wanted for treatment; Clonter, a faith-healer;

and Hissip, whom Cyrus already knew slightly, a militant vegetarian, active against the medarchy because of its use of animal matter in medical preparations. Feeling increasingly sheepish about having a fire-arm in a world suddenly returned to the normal pattern of talking about the horrors of Ama tyranny (but experiencing no more of them than the prospect of mandatory inoculation), a world where subcuties didn’t shoot to kill or pursue their quarry with scientific devices of the chase, Cyrus felt as though the gun had swollen to many times normal size. Still, somewhere in the heterogeneous opposition, someone had relayed information to the orderlies. He grasped the rifle again.

[to be concluded]

Cyrus, Virginia, and Hank are momentarily safe, but how safe are they? Among this group is the traitor who informed on them. Is this meeting of the underground another trap?

You can’t afford to miss the concluding chapters of this story, which will appear in the May issue of *Science Fiction Stories*, on sale at all stands March 1st. Reserve your copy now!



THE LAST WORD



The Reckoning

THE FIGURES for the final rating of the Charles Long novelet are not a misprint. Nearly 50% of the votes listed this story as "outstanding", which is designated by a "O" on my tally sheet. The yarn did get some second place votes, but there were more first place ratings than second place — so that the divisor was larger than the dividend.

With very few exceptions, Dr. Vaisberg also received your hearty approval. Those who disapproved were not indifferent, and the reader who wondered if the editor had taken leave of his wits, stating that "The Sun Stood Still" was the worst story he had ever read, fairly sums up the opposition. But nearly 25% of the voters also found this story "outstanding", nor did it lack for first place resignations. So, without in any way trying to deprive the opposition of its share of "the last word", let me say that I was not unaware of certain technical flaws (storywise, etc.) in the novelet, but felt that its appeal would outweigh them for most readers.

Some were disposed to quibble over the type of air-hose that our perplexed young man was wearing on the cover, but all thought that the cover, as such, was a good job. I'll wait for more returns to come in before I try to estimate your votes on the serial question, in its latest form.

One final word on "The Sun Stood Still". This sort of tale, if good, is only good once. I'm glad that most of you liked it — but don't you agree that any attempt at repeat would spoil it?

Here, then, is the final statistic:

1. Riddle of the Deadly Paradise (Long)	0.75
2. The Sun Stood Still (Vaisberg) tied with The Isolationists (Knox)	2.08
3. The Tomb (Detzer)	2.68

Although the point scores are the same, a plurality of "A" ratings gives Dr. Vaisberg top billing in second place. Diane Detzer also received some "A" votes.

HIGH LITERACY

Dear Mr. Lowndes:

May I join the symposium on what is science fiction?

One of the things that most impresses me about the SF magazines today is the high literacy of the people who read and edit them. Of course, it is praising with faint damns to make the obvious statement that science fiction is far better—and, at least, far more *nearly* literature—than the stuff that appears in the slicks. That's like saying that W. H. Auden is a better poet than Edgar Guest. But the SF magazines today publish the most learned and thoughtful editorials, and the best letters columns available on a newsstand. No exception was "Theory and Practice" in your March issue, which, together

with its letters column, inspired me with a desire to get into the act.

I consider science fiction a definite and established literary art form—to such an extent that, even though its definitions and canons may not have been established by analysis, any aficionado of the art can tell intuitively whether a particular piece belongs in the category or outside it. Even though no satisfactory formulation that includes everything we would wish to include may have been reached, we *feel* the rightness or wrongness of applying the term. What follows is an attempt to reduce that feeling to some sort of formula.

One of the beauties of science fiction—the main reason, I think, for its superiority to slick formula fiction—is the

extreme flexibility of the medium. Provided the touchstone of science fiction can be applied to it, a writer can bring in almost anything that interests him. As an outstanding example, consider the brilliant use Murray Leinster has made of his love and understanding of animals, and his fascination with the American Indian. In fact, the wider scope of imagination permitted to the SF writer allows an even more interesting use of such material than realistic writing could. Dogs, Indians, advertising hucksters, dictators, progressive educators, practitioners of thought control, career women, matriarchs, politicians and other phenomena of contemporary society appear in sharper focus and higher illumination when portrayed against the background of alien worlds and alternate time tracks.

What, then—assuming that I am justified in saying that a writer may use any material he desires provided he satisfies the essential criterion of science fiction—shall we say this essential criterion is? Let's arrive at it step by step.

It must include more than the scope of verifiable and respectable science. In fact, it seems even too stringent to insist that it do violence to no *known* scientific fact or law; this would eliminate the Edgar Rice Burroughs Mars books and the stories of A. Merritt, and these are certainly classics in the field. On the other hand, it should stop short of including all horror stories and flights of imagination. The folk tale or fairy story; the mystical allegory; stories dealing with the supernatural; and even horror tales of the type of Wilson Tucker's rat-girl story do not belong in the category of science fiction.

What limits have I defined? As a core, the realm of present-day theoretical and applied science defined in its broadest sense to include psychology and the social sciences; the freedom to extrapolate this knowledge to the very limit of the author's imagination, including all forms of space and time travel and all kinds of extra-terrestrial phenomena—not to mention the almost-untouched possibilities offered by the depths of the ocean on

Earth, or any other planet. Add to this, the entire realm of parapsychology—including telepathy, teleportation, ESP, TK, clairvoyance and clairaudience—short of spiritualism, ghost stories and what I suppose you might call the religious supernatural.

Mysticism and metaphysics belong; in fact, all the great SF writers have a strain of mysticism implicit or explicit in their work. But theology is not a science in the sense in which I have defined the scope of science fiction; and the type of mystical or supernatural story which is primarily theological, rather than psychological, seems not to belong. For example, I would call Franz Werfel's "Star of the Unborn" science fiction, but would exclude the same author's "Song of Bernadette"—even though "Star" is actually the more mystical work. Stories involving longevity, eternal youth, and resuscitation of the dead

belong—provided, again, the emphasis is not theological.

This background provides an almost limitless scope for social satire, serious social documentation, utopian dreaming, mystical insight, educational theory, political theory, ethical thought and pure fast action. In fact, I would consider a good, swiftly-moving story the only other criterion of science fiction other than its ability to fit into the previously-described background. Mood stories and philosophical and psychological studies may be good, but they aren't SF. Not that there is no room in SF for mood, philosophy and psychology; generous helpings of all three go into all the best efforts in the field, but not to the exclusion of action. "Gunner Cade" is both philosophy and social science, but it never slows down its pace to be either.

And this brings us to the question of love interest. Here an element of personal taste comes in, but writers and editors should bear in mind that an enormous number of ardent SF fans are women—possibly many more than authors and

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THE RECKONING

editors realize—and women like love stories. I would agree with the correspondent who says that a love story with an interplanetary background is not science fiction; but my drippily-sentimental feminine soul will get a bigger bang out of a good story, that falls properly in the scope of science fiction, if sex rears its lovely head and romantic love adds a fillip to the untrammelled flight of imagination. One of the best science fiction stories I ever read was pure metaphysics and educational theory, without a single female character; but the measure of its greatness is that I think it is.

If it had been only a shade less well-written, and its insights had been less trenchant, I would have rated it far below "Rogue in Space" and "The Ship of Ishtar"—both of which include love stories to delight the heart of a woman in addition to the bona fide material of science fiction.

I can cull another example of what I mean from your March issue. "The Time for Delusion" is by far the best story in the issue, and it has

no love interest. It's a great analysis of the psychology of belief, and the wry truth of it cannot soon be forgotten. On the other hand, "Far From Somewhere" ends at just about the point it should have begun. *Christina's* discoveries provided a springboard for a truly thrilling story that just didn't get written; and, as the thing stands, no amount of interplanetary romance could save it. In other words, the story missed the boat and what it needs is not a love interest, but a plot.

"Robots' Gambit", however, is a very good example of the proper use of love interest in a true SF story. The essential theme of the skill, obedience, and loyalty of the robots is within the scope of the form; the action moves fast; and there is a genuine plot, not merely a gimmick; and the lovers' quarrel which is integrated into the plot makes it more fun for women readers. The Edgar Rice Burroughs Mars stories are outstanding examples of the science fiction love story.

To sum up, there are two criteria of the true science fic-

tion story: (1) it must incorporate in a form limited only by the imagination of the writer, and the suspension of disbelief of the reader, some aspect of science, pseudo-science or near-science—including psychology and the social sciences, but excluding theology—and incorporating something of the attitude of the members of the Venus Club and their ilk that we'll take it as long as it can't be disproved, or provides us such emotional satisfaction that we won't accept disproof; (2) it must be a true, swiftly-moving, plot and action story. Provided these two elements are present, no holds are barred, from mutant talking beagle hounds to 25,000-year-old Tibetan lamas. (Incidentally, I'd class "Lost Horizon" as science fiction.)

Implicit in the foregoing are the explicit answers to the three questions at the end of your editorial. There are certain techniques of plot construction which apply just as much to science fiction as to any other plotted story; and the mastery of these techniques guarantees that the writer will escape from your

three traps. There are techniques for inducing the suspension of disbelief, and these assure that he won't make a fool of himself; techniques for incorporating essential information in action and dialogue, and these assure that the story won't degenerate into a lecture; and techniques of clear and lucid English prose, and these assure that the reader won't be befogged and befuddled.

An excellent example is the beginning of "The Time for Delusion" in which suspension of disbelief is induced by the juxtaposition of the familiar and the outlandish. This is so well done, with the accumulated details of the barking dog, the telephone, the Professor's blood-pressure and the drunk with the wrong number, set against the ring that wasn't a ring and didn't disturb the dog, and the extra-terrestrial voice, that there is a definite moment of shocked disappointment at the discovery that this is not going to be a story about a telephone call from Venus—but a shock that is justified by its value in showing how convincing Denworth's hoax was.

An example of a badly-done introduction of science is "The Jolly Boys" in which it isn't clear whether any, all, one, or two of the booksellers is a robot; and the opening paragraph is sloppy and confusing. By the time we've established that *Frank* is the robot, the effect is not of a twist ending, but simply of sloppy exposition. Contrast this with the beautiful transition from the known to the unknown, and the skillful introduction of needed explanations in "The Ship of Ishtar"; the exposition of the cult of the Gunners in "Gunner Cade" and its delightfully-amusing use of the ruins of the Pentagon Building and the race memories of atomic bombings; or the manner in which the mechanical aspects of the artificial satellite are incorporated in the story in Murray Leinster's "Space Platform".

I wouldn't like to see science fiction classed as literature; I classify it as such and I think it includes a great deal of the best writing that is being done today. And this letter is my contribution to literary criticism in the field. Thanks

for reading it and I hope that you will find parts of it at least worth space in your letters column.

BETTY MOORE, 49 Greenwich Avenue, New York 14, N.Y.

To insist that a story which does violence to *any known* scientific fact or law cannot be admitted as science fiction is, I agree, to be too stringent. After all, numerous "facts" are "known" only to experts. I think *damon knight* hit the nail when he drew the line at facts and scientific laws which are "known to anyone who has mastered general science in high school"—and, perhaps, is reasonably up to date on facts and laws discussed in current scientific magazines that are generally available to a layman, and are written in terms a person who understands general science can understand. For example, an author may not be a chemist—but he should not be allowed to get away with an error that any high school chemistry graduate could spot. It's the author's obligation to check his ideas (in fields where he hasn't much knowledge) with someone who, at the very least, knows the elements of them thoroughly.

So, as much as I enjoy the Burroughs Mars and Venus novels—even today—I can't accept them as science fiction.

The following letter shows a different reaction to "The Time For Delusion".

MINORITY REPORT

Dear Editor:

God spare us from you. ("Us" is s-f fans.) All these so-called "editorials" you write profess your dedication to s-f, air your beliefs as to what's wrong with the field and declare your interest in the opinions of your readers in this subject. Yet, you publish a story as poor as "The Time For Delusion."

I choose this one for attack, not because it's the only poor story in the magazine, but because it's a masterpiece of untalented, unintelligent, ridiculous writing.

Certainly it is not legitimate for a writer to fool his readers by such a device as is used here. I'm not altogether sure you wouldn't print a story which ended: "...and then I woke up." instead of having a denouement; that is, incidentally, a necessary part of any plot.

As for the rest of the "story": it is asinine. The writer could have made his point much better in an editorial. I have honestly tried to imagine who could have written such trash and I can't come up with anything better than a high school freshman.

You asked for the opinions of your readers concerning the criterion against which science fiction stories should be judged. This, too, is ridiculous, coming as it does from an editor. Anyone who has attained a position such as yours, in a respectable magazine, would be able to frame the limitations for this form by extrapolation from the short story form.

There *must* be further restrictions, since this is a special sub-division of the short story form.

Must # 1. The story must have a scientific theme.

Must # 2. The science must be legitimate—not a pseudo-science trumped-up for the sake of a story (that would be fantasy)

Must # 3. The story must be credible. The humans in it must behave like believable humans; or if they do not,

sufficient plausible explanation must be given as to why not.

In answer to another question in your March publication, scientific background should be given in that amount which will make the story lucid to the audience the author is addressing.

The standard for plausibility, lucidity, etc. is judged against the audience to whom the author appeals to (or to those who buy the magazine in which it is to appear). The audience should be clearly envisioned by the author long before he sits down to write.

Science fiction is a unique field. An author starts with an idea. He tosses it about till he figures the best form in which to present it to his audience. Science fiction may be the answer when nothing else will quite do it. For here, the author can create his own world, populate it as he wishes, and give it the social structure necessary to put his idea across. Some terrifically valuable ideas are shrouded in what can only be termed "trashy" writing, which purports to be science fiction. Actually, the main rea-

son I wade thru so much science fiction is that I'm trying to sift out those few ideas. I must admit that, tho I read for the ideas, I am sometimes entertained by a story...

By the way, Isaac Asimov's article was worth more of the 35c price of this issue than all the rest together.

*MRS. JUDITH S. GRAHAM,
9 Huntington Street, Hartford,
Conn.*

You'd be amazed, Mrs. Graham, at the number of stories in science fiction magazines, back in the late 20s and early 30s which *did* employ that "...and then I woke up" ending—in one form or another. In fact, unless my memory plays me false, all of the "Tubby" stories by Ray Cummings were dream stories.

But Lord help me if I used such a tale today! I certainly have no intention of doing so.

It used to irritate me when I read a story, back in the old days, which struck me as being just as pointless and bad as "The Time For Delusion" struck you. Then I'd write a letter of protest to the editor, only to be told in his comments: "You must remember that many readers have praised the story you dislike

very highly. Have pity on the poor editor, who cannot possibly please everyone, but nonetheless has to try." What a spineless way of trying to slip out of it! I thought.

Then... I became an editor. And every now and then, I'd get that kind of letter.

What *can* the editor say? Well, if the majority of the responses agreed with you in substance, then the editor really ought to apologize to the readers. And, were this the case with "Time For Delusion", I wouldn't hesitate to say, "It looks as if I pulled a real boner this time. I'm sorry. I thought it was a good story, but you've shown me I was wrong. I'll try not to repeat the error." In the present instance, however, the majority agreed with the editor, who thought the story a particularly good one.

So...have pity on the poor editor, who cannot possibly please everyone, but nonetheless has to try. I'm really sorry that you were displeased however, and hope that you'll find other stories in our magazines enjoyable to put you in a forgiving mood.

ABOUT UNMIXED PRAISE

Dear Rawl:

About which features we

prefer—in case you have to cut any—for the love of good space, leave *damon knight* out last, not first. Next to last might be more strictly accurate—but we may rely on you not to cut the editorials, may we not? In case you think that this provision is just the best butter, examine the case objectively for yourself: don't your editorials have everything we love *damon* for, only mellow-er?

You hurt my feelings when you insist on taking unmixed praise with a grain of salt. It is the first serious complaint I have ever had to make of any of your editorials. To the reader who shares your—here, I'll show you how your reservations sound—your apparent fondness for what purports to be literature, specially the sort which is claimed to be scientific, see what I mean? insulting, isn't it—well, there is a sense of communication with a kindred spirit, not always with the same data but lots of it. It adds to one's knowledge without crowding anything. I would buy your magazines if for nothing else—just as I would for the stories, if for

nothing else. You can follow this? Furthermore, I feel sure that numberless readers feel that way. From what I have seen of science fiction addicts, we are not people you have to please with every word at every page. Lucky, isn't it. If one has room to fool around a little, so much more can be accomplished.

But your feeling about the uselessness of unmixed praise is fair enough up to a point. However, I *like* the way you edit. So do lots of other people. Isn't that information also?

However, since you ask for some flaw picking, I will try. Your decision about cutting SFQ is a profound sorrow to a lot of people. It was the best of your good bunch. It looks like a hasty decision, too, since it comes at a time of marketing stress for all. Okay. That is how you decided. But we mourn. That clear?

How about a small quality quarterly—or is it a quarterly issue, as well as the size, that does the harm?

That boy with the three names, Theordore El Thomas, can write for it. That story of

his, "The Sound of the Wind" was the prize package in both of the current books. Bet you thought I would pick "The Tower of Zanid"? Nope. A deCamp novel won't stand chopping into parts. He weaves in many strands which are part of the cable, and no recap is enough. The thing to do when deCamp sends a message from Krishna is to cancel all other engagements and settle down for several hours of happy concentration. You have blighted what might have been a great joy to one and all. Since you want your praise mixed with objections, may this make you happy.

The fact is, I saw the title with delight, the "in four parts" with horror, and decided to avoid the whole mess until all the sections were in and could be dealt with properly. But then I weakened and read it anyway. This makes me twice as sore of course.

You know something? The best editors really know what readers like, and it sometimes seems as if you are kidding when you ask for letters. Gosh, if you got your wish when

[Turn To Page 126]

**Tops
In Western
Fiction**

**WESTERN
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*The March
issue features*

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would you do any real editing, for reading all the letters? But then I recall how I was the wonder of the family for picking race winners on form until one day I went down to the track and really put down some bets. Different then, isn't it?

May you keep on winning in your own way.

ALMA HILL, 14 Pleasant Street, Fort Kent, Maine

Perhaps the editor is too conscious of his fallibility, Alma. Besides, if the book is as good as all that, then why isn't the circulation in the millions?

"Unmixed" praise may have been the wrong term to use—I really meant "undiscriminating" praise or "unqualified" praise. But I don't at all mind even "unmixed" praise when I know that the praiser is not too easy to please. Like the gentleman below.

HE WROTE IT

Mr. Lowndes:

Here, as promised, is the written word, expressing much the same feelings as I made vocally in your office.

Science Fiction Stories is

improving mighty. It's only been a year or so since I began reading it regularly again, but the trend is highly noticeable. For one thing, you have been showing more care in the preparation of the package (I have a feeling this took some long hard work with the publishing powers-that-be), so that the recent editions of *Future* and *SFS* have begun to look very handsome. As I noted when in your office, you have been working some outright miracles with your engraver; recent covers have been vastly superior to the washed-out look a year ago.

Another outstanding improvement is in the interior—new stock, better printing, and above all, a more careful job of editing and proofreading. About this time last year, I was frequently reading stories just to find all the spelling mistakes and typhowlers I could. The search was seldom unrewarded, with all sorts of printing flaws on every page: dropped letters, railroaded lines (one of the most frequent offenders), whole dropped lines, and so on. In contrast, I can't think of any of the last

few issues of your magazines that had a single notable error. Last year I thought you were one of the world's worst spellers; it appears that you have only now been able to really do a job on manuscripts. I remember in particular a Silverberg novelet a while back that read like a first draft; your stories were good, but the whole operation had rough edges.

This is no longer true. As I

remarked to James Blish in a recent letter, the field has been suffering from a preponderance of sloppy editing jobs. You, Mr. Lowndes, have pulled *Future* and *SFS* out of that category; within the limits of your publisher's requirements, you are developing a very neat product. I hope these restrictions will ease even more in the future (not italics this time) and such

[Turn Page]

STATEMENT REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AS AMENDED BY THE ACTS OF MARCH 3, 1933, AND JULY 2, 1946 (Title 35, United States Code, Section 233) SHOWING THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION OF

Science Fiction Stories published 10 times a year at Holyoke, Mass. for October 1st, 1953.

1. The names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Louis H. Silberkleit, 241 Church St., New York 13, N. Y., editor, Robert W. Lowndes, 241 Church St., New York 13, N. Y., managing editor, Michael I. Silberkleit, 241 Church St., New York 13, N. Y., business manager, Maurice Coyne, 241 Church St., New York 13, N. Y.

2. The owner is: (if owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a partnership or other unincorporated firm, its name and address, as well as that of each individual member, must be given.) Columbia Publications, Inc., 241 Church St., New York 13, N. Y., Louis H. Silberkleit, 241 Church St., New York 13, N. Y., Maurice Coyne, 241 Church St., New

York 13, N. Y., Michael I. Silberkleit, 241 Church St., New York 13, N. Y.

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4. Paragraphs 2 and 3 include, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting; also the statements in the two paragraphs show the affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner.

5. The average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the 12 months preceding the date shown above was: (This information is required from daily, weekly, semiweekly, and triweekly newspapers only.)

Louis H. Silberkleit (Signature of publisher) Sworn to and subscribed before me this 1st day of October, 1953.

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things as cover logo, contents page layout, and department layout will improve. Only one request: In recent issues, you have occasionally used a story heading that was identical to that used throughout the magazine edited by a certain round and friendly acquaintance of ours with saucers on the brain. (Is such circumlocution necessary? I never have liked the appearance of **FU**, from the very beginning, when it was still a pretty fair magazine). Anyway, please don't use it. It leaves bad associations with **Ufos** and all that.

To the point. The on-stands issue of **SFS** is a good job. Zirul's "Lullaby" is a strong little piece; Spencer (who is he?) left me most unsatisfied with "Mirror"; the story line was interesting, but something happened about 2/3 of the way along. "Constabulary Duty" was merely routine; this is one time when our friend Calbob M. Silverknox didn't deserve the cover. De Camp's serial is competent de Camp; I hope it improves.

However, everything in the issue pales against the lead novelet. I'll say now that Ted

Thomas' "The Sound of the Wind" will be one of the outstanding efforts of the year, and ranks as one of the very finest stories to come along for many, many moons. This is Thomas' best story to date, including "The Far Look", his best previous work. It is also the strongest thing you have run in the last couple of years. Ted has always been a careful writer; this story proves that he is also an artist. The last few lines of Chapter II held me up for several minutes; I didn't want to lose the feeling,

the picture it evoked. Every so often you come across something that is more than the sum of its parts—"The Sound of the Wind" is one of them.

I, for one, don't care whether a cover illustrates a story or not, so long as it is a careful job, shows imagination, and is attractive. Doing covers is a job, and no one, I am sure, expects a work of art (literally meant) each time. It is welcome when one comes along, like the Bonestell and Alejandro covers of yore, and

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I think the incidence of real art can be increased when you don't restrict your artist to story illustrations. I'm in favor of keeping these in the minority, frankly.

Comment: I think Thomas' story would have been a stand-out even in the strongest issue of any magazine. There are many who will apologize, saying that—well, after all—the rest of the issue wasn't so hot. I find that science fiction magazines are published at such intervals that, even with the few I read, I am reading

almost continuously, so that the stories from one issue of a magazine are still fresh when a new issue of a different publication comes out. Thus there is a constant background of comparison. Each issue must still be considered a discrete unit (quantum?) however, to allow for step-by-step comparison. No apologies, then; "The Sound of the Wind" was one of that rare breed, a really fine piece of work.

J. MARTIN GRAETZ, 32
Fayette Street, Cambridge 39,
Mass.

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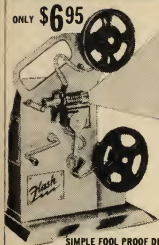
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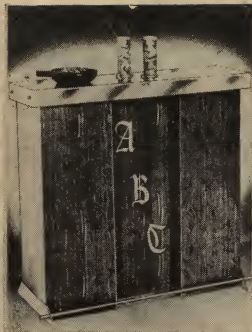
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